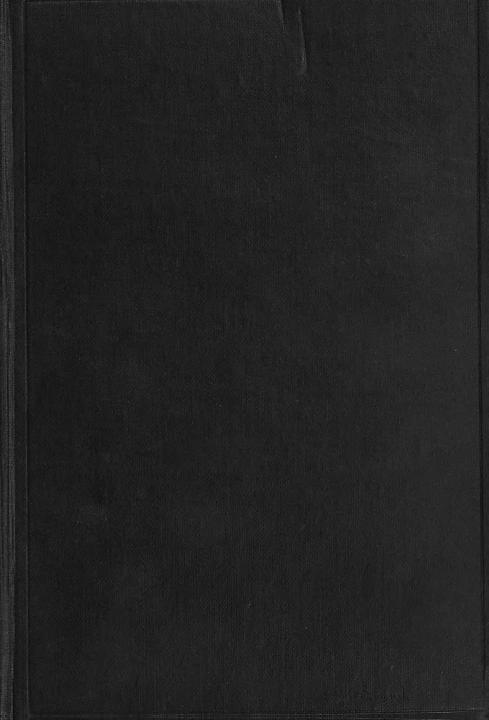
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THE VANISHED VICE-CONSUL

By
MICHAEL ANNESLEY



GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD. LONDON TORONTO BOMBAY SYDNEY

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To LYN who is never forgotten

The earlier Secret Service activities of Sir George Fawley, Lawrie Fenton, and Stella Polowski will be found in the author's novels entitled "Room 14," "Spies in the Web," "Spies in Action," and "The Missing Agent."

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CHAPTER I

"I'm Told That I Must Give Up My Friends"

Sir George Fawley gravely regarded his guests across the dinner-table. Lawrence Fenton was enthusiastically relating some anecdote of the countryside, for with his charming wife, Stella, he lived far away from the noise and bustle of London which echoed dimly in the quiet square where Sir George resided, and it was a foible of his to consider himself a complete rustic.

Sir George, however, was only half listening to his friend's chatter. Across the shaded lights and the gleaming silver he stole an occasional glance at Stella, and he was worried. He was fully aware that married life is not always so easy for young people, unless they learn quickly that it is not possible to travel in opposite directions while in double harness if that harness is to be kept whole and unbroken. But he had always regarded Stella and Lawrie as an ideally matched pair. Lawrie might appear little more than a stupid dude to the casual observer, especially when he mounted his monocle and assumed his carefully practised semi-imbecile expression, but Sir George knew better. Lawrence Fenton, during his active years, had been one of the best men in the Secret Service, and half-baked nitwits do not travel far along that perilous road.

Stella had been an ideal mate, and it had warmed Sir George's heart to see them together, carefree and happy. A son, who had now reached the mature age of eighteen months, had increased their joy, but as Sir George watched Stella's pretty face, framed in its halo of fair hair, he realized that a good deal of the sparkle had gone from her blue eyes. In some subtle way she had changed.

The casual observer would not have noticed anything, but observation of trifles was part of Sir George's business, and he knew that, charming as she was, this was not the Stella of two years ago. There was something missing.

Nor, for that matter, was her husband quite the same. His method of addressing Stella had altered. Gone were the frivolous and rude remarks which had invariably brought some scathing retort made in harmless banter. Now Fenton seemed almost to defer anxiously to his wife's wishes, and all the old raillery had vanished. He did not seem to have gained anything by his change of attitude. Stella was still amiable and smiling, still as obviously in love with him as he was with her, but the splendid camaraderie had faded, and to Sir George's way of thinking a tiny rift had formed between them. Certainly it was infinitesimal at the moment, but rifts in married life have a way of widening.

Sir George put up his hand with the intention of removing and cleaning his pince-nez. Then he caught Stella's eye, a thought flashed swiftly through his mind, and he changed the movement to a gentle caress of his smoothly brushed white hair. For he had remembered suddenly how Stella had often declared that when he took off his glasses and polished them, then invariably there was some trouble brewing for somebody. It was nonsense, of course, for such a proceeding meant no more than that he was unusually thoughtful, but he desisted, since he had no wish to add to the anxieties of his friends when he was certain they had troubles of their own already. Yet there was, as Stella had good cause to know, a substratum of truth in her observation.

The old gentleman sighed. He had a married son of his own who but for Lawrie Fenton would not be alive to-day, but he had always regarded Stella and Lawrie as

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members of the family. Of all the marriages of his friends he would have betted heavily two years, no, as late as a year, ago that this one would remain an outstanding success. Yet it seemed he might be proved

wrong.

Fenton finished his narrative, and Sir George, catching Stella's eye across the table, smiled and rose. As there were only three of them they took their coffee in the comfortable lounge, and Stella, at Sir George's request, later went to the piano, where she played waltzes from operettas of thirty or forty years ago. Sir George was very fond of these, for they took him back to the days of his youth, when responsibility did not weigh so heavily upon his shoulders. Neither of the men spoke while Stella's supple fingers flickered over the keys, but after a while she closed the piano with a decisive snap and rose from the music-stool.

"I'm afraid I must be going, Sir George," she said.
"Lawrie can stay, but I'd like to make sure that my son and heir is safely put away for the night."

"So soon?" Sir George asked in surprise.

"Nannie's sure to have done everything," Fenton protested.

"I know," Stella replied, "but I want to make certain. I know you'll forgive me, Sir George. A mother's respon-

sibilities, you know."

"I'm afraid," said Fenton, as he and his host returned to the lounge after seeing Stella off in Sir George's Rolls, "you must think Stella rather discourteous, dashing

away like this."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow!" replied Sir George, patting Fenton reassuringly on the shoulder. "You and Stella know me well enough to be as rude as you like. Naturally she's anxious about her child. Take that chair—it's the most comfortable one."

"Thanks." Fenton lay back and moodily knocked

the ash off his cigar. "Fact is, Stella's crazy about the kid."

"Quite rightly, too," remarked the other.

"I know, but there are limits. What's the sense of dragging the poor infant up to London? I wanted to leave him behind, but Stella wouldn't hear of it. Said she couldn't bear to be separated from him. After all, he's got a very capable nurse. One of the old-fashioned sort. She regards me with so much disfavour that I think she suspects me of not being either Stella's husband or the father of the child!"

Sir George chuckled. This was more like the old Fenton. "How is the pig-breeding progressing?" he asked, for Fenton had amused himself by trying in a dilettante fashion to produce prize pigs, though the venture had never been made to pay for itself.

Fenton smiled faintly, and relapsed into his former subdued frame of mind. "Oh, much as usual. I don't know that I shall carry on with them much longer."

"But you must have something to occupy your time, especially if you're not allowed to look after the baby."

"I expect I shall have plenty to do," said Fenton

gloomily.

There was silence. Sir George regarded the glowing end of his cigar in perplexity. There was certainly something rotten in the state of Denmark. Fenton had lost all his former joviality, his old fire and spontaneous wit had vanished, and he was like a man who has a constant worry upon his mind. Sir George hardly cared to probe too deeply into the matter, for it was a personal affair which concerned his guest alone, and he well knew that interfering people who try to assist husband and wife usually receive the recriminations of both parties. He wondered if Fenton found family life dull, and was secretly longing for the old adventurous career he had

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led when he had been in the Secret Service. He sug-

gested as much to Fenton.

The younger man shook his head and grinned. "No. The responsibilities of a family are too great to allow me to consider such pleasant things. Indeed, when I think of the times I used to have they give me the willies. I must be losing my nerve. With this constant consideration of Stella and the boy I shall presently become too nervous to cross a road."

"Nerves would be a new thing to you, Lawrie. But, you know, you can overdo these attentions to your wife and child."

"Oh, I don't think so. After all, they are both pretty valuable to me."

"H'm," grunted Sir George. "Women are devilish peculiar."

"I quite agree," replied Fenton, with considerable

feeling.

They chatted for a time on other and less complicated subjects. Over a final whisky and soda Fenton seemed inclined to speak of something which he obviously had on his mind, but although Sir George gave him more than one opportunity at the last moment his guest's courage seemed to fail him. At length, as the church clock at the far end of the square tolled out the hour of twelve, Fenton stepped into his host's Rolls and was driven back to his hotel.

Sir George stood silhouetted against the golden light streaming from the front door and watched the red taillamp vanish round the corner. Then he walked slowly back to the lounge. There he stood for a moment in deep thought before finally removing his rimless pincenez and polishing them on his silk handkerchief.

"That's the disadvantage of having super-observant friends," he remarked. "I've been looking through a thick fog all evening, and while Stella and Lawrie were

here I simply dare not clean my glasses! "He squinted through the lenses and sighed. "There's trouble in the Fenton ménage, or else I'm getting too old for my job." He replaced his glasses and poured himself out a final night-cap. "And I'll bet there's a woman at the bottom of it." He paused, put down the tumbler, and frowned. "Or a child," he added.

When Lawrence Fenton arrived at his hotel he found his wife reading in bed. He grinned affectionately at her, for she made an extremely pretty picture lying propped up by pillows in the shaded light of the bedside lamp, about her shoulders a filmy bedjacket which seemed to enhance the colour of her eyes. Fenton leaned over the bed, kissed her on the mouth, and then on the curl of fair hair which strayed down over her forehead.

"How's His Highness?" he asked.

"Very well and sound asleep." Stella stifled a yawn and placed her book on the table which stood by the side of the bed. "A stupid story! Chapters and chapters about a husband and wife quarrelling."

"How depressing! Why do they row?" Fenton

tugged at his dress tie.

"I've not discovered yet. What did you talk about with Sir George?"

"Oh, nothing much. The perplexities of life in

general, old times, and old acquaintances."

There was a pause. Stella, with delicate fingers, traced obscure patterns on the eiderdown. From the recesses of the adjoining dressing-room came distressing noises of Fenton singing softly to himself. Presently Stella said, "Did you sound Sir George on—what we discussed?"

The distressing noise stopped, and Fenton made a wry face at himself in the mirror. "No, I didn't," he replied shortly.

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"But why not?" Stella demanded, with a trace of annoyance in her voice. "I expressly asked you to if you got the opportunity."

"There was no opportunity," said Fenton.

"You could surely have made one."

"Well, I dare say I shall see Sir George again before long," Fenton said propitiatingly as he sauntered back into the bedroom in a pair of scarlet silk pyjamas.

"That's not good enough. We've been talking this matter over for weeks, and we've got no further. It's

my belief you don't want to make a start at all."

Fenton sighed as he got into bed. "All right, I'll go and see him to-morrow."

"Promise?"

"I suppose so." Fenton switched out the light.

"Thank you, darling," Stella said sweetly.

There was a silence, broken only by the murmur of the traffic. Then Fenton said in muffled tones, "What did you say that book you were reading was about?"

"A husband and wife quarrelling."

"A damn' silly subject," grunted Fenton.

The next day, in fulfilment of his promise to Stella, he rang up Sir George Fawley and fixed an appointment at the Foreign Office for the afternoon. At a few minutes to the hour he entered the building, using by force of habit the small side-door through which he had come and gone on so many previous and far more urgent occasions. The door-keeper recognized him and saluted, and very soon Fenton was sending in his name to Sir George.

At the moment when his secretary brought in Fenton's card Sir George was deep in conversation with a young man whose accent, despite his grammatically perfect English, betrayed the fact that he was a foreigner. Sir George was listening, while the young man spoke rapidly, reading occasionally from a sheaf of papers with

which his thin hands continually fidgeted. Occasionally he raised his white face, in which were deeply set two burning dark eyes with the intense, unflinching stare of the fanatic, and Sir George would nod composedly and ask him to continue. At length the young man leaned back in his chair.

"There you have the story, what there is of it, and that's very little," he said, picking up the half-smoked

cigarette from the ash-tray by his side.

Sir George grunted. "The situation is certainly rather obscure. However— Look here, would you mind going into that room for a few minutes? I've got a fellow here by appointment, but he oughtn't to keep me long."

"Certainly." The young man gathered up his papers and followed Sir George through a door into a small but

comfortable apartment.

"You'll find various illustrated papers to amuse you," remarked the latter as he closed the door. He did not add that in a very short while some one would come into the room for the ostensible purpose of conducting a search through innumerable files. In reality he would be there to make quite sure that the waiting person confined his interest strictly to the illustrated papers.

Sir George Fawley was not the man to take unnecessary risks. As he re-entered his office he stood for a moment looking about him. It was a comfortable room, thickly carpeted, with several massive armchairs and a deep leather-covered settee. Sir George's desk stood in the centre of the room. A bookcase crammed with books of reference, a huge safe, a large square table littered with papers, a few dingy oil-paintings, and a big case of maps completed the furnishings. Sir George stepped over to the armchair in which his late guest had sat, pushed it farther away, and turned the cushion. Next he inspected the ash-tray, saw a half-smoked cigarette,

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noted that it was a foreign brand, and carefully concealed it in the waste-paper basket. Having taken these precautions, he sniffed the air, detected, or so he thought, the strange aroma of foreign tobacco, and promptly lit a cigar. Finally he went to his desk and began to write a letter. Not until he had come to the bottom of the first page did he touch the bell. He was still busily writing when Fenton entered.

"Well, Lawrie, my boy," Sir George cried jovially, "how's the world using you?" and added, "Sit down," pointing to the armchair vacated by his last visitor.

"Now tell me all your troubles."

"I've not got any," replied Fenton, aware that the

elder man was watching him keenly.

"Oh, yes, you have. You ought to know better than to try to conceal things from me when I've spent a considerable portion of my life trying to coax hidden knowledge from people who are unwilling to part with it."

"As a matter of fact," muttered Fenton uneasily, "I've come to ask a favour of you."

"And that is?"

"Can you find me a job?"

"A job?" echoed Sir George, genuinely surprised.

"But only last night you told me you'd given up the

Game for good."

"I have. I didn't mean that kind of a job. I've no wish to get shot or knifed in the disgusting purlieus of some Continental city. I want a nice, safe job, preferably in a bomb-proof office, with a suitable salary attached."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the other, looking as amazed as if his secretary had suddenly asked him for

a baronetcy.

Fenton grinned and adjusted his monocle. "Perhaps I'd better explain. It's really Stella's idea. I don't want a job at all. I shall probably loathe it. But since this

boy of ours has come along our outlook has been altered. At least, Stella's has. You see, we've a comfortable income, but we've been living right up to it, and Stella's notion is that I should start in and earn a living, so that with the additional cash we can afford to give our son the best possible education."

"Ah, I begin to understand," murmured Sir George. "Fact is," continued Fenton, "I've taken second place; it's the kid that counts, and Stella can be mighty uncompromising when she likes. If she sets her mind on a thing which concerns Peter she sees that she gets it. I've got to become a pen-pusher of some kind so that later on the lad can go to Eton and Oxford—though I'm not so keen on Eton; I'd rather he went to my old place. I've got to chuck pig-breeding, which amuses me, and come back to London, which I hate. I'm told that I must give up my friends, Bohemian people like Valma Varoff, and cultivate influential acquaintances who won't be half so amusing, but probably a deuced sight more useful—all for the sake of a problematical event which

may take place twelve years hence.

"Mind you," he went on quickly, "I'm not saying that Stella's wrong; in fact, I think she's quite correct. I'm a casual sort of ass, without much thought of the future. I don't want you to think that I'm criticizing Stella; she's merely shown me that this aimless sort of life won't do. I thought she was made of good stuff when I met her in Warsaw, I knew it when I married her, but I realize now that she's of far finer metal than I ever imagined." He coloured faintly at this unusual frankness and continued hurriedly: "Eton and Oxford are to be the stepping-stones to a diplomatic career, and one can't manage that on a thousand a year. So, you see, Sir George, I've come to you for advice." He ran his hand over his fair hair and laughed shortly. "I'm afraid I've been talking an awful lot of rot, but I feel

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better for having got it off my chest. It's been bottled up too long."

"So that's your trouble," remarked Sir George.

"Oh, it's no trouble," Fenton protested.

"No, but life hasn't been quite so smooth and easy of late."

"Well, Stella has been so eager for me to find a job, and I suppose I didn't like being driven."

"How truly English! I see Stella's point, and yours

too."

Sir George gently broke the ash from his cigar, and Fenton, who had up to now been so eager to relate his story that he had ignored the cigarettes, helped himself from a silver box.

"I'd find it easier to get you a job on your old lines,"

Sir George went on, "but of course that's no use."

"'Fraid not," said Fenton. "It must be a respectable and safe job." He threw up his head and laughed shortly. "Good Lord, fancy me asking for a safe job!"

"All the same," remarked the elder man, "I can't exactly visualize you polishing a seat in the Foreign Office, though I am the first to admit that you fully deserve more reward than you've had for your activities. Of course, the F.O. may come later, but at the moment such experience as you have had is not likely to be of much assistance within these holy walls." Sir George's eyes twinkled. "It seems that some kind of initiation into a diplomatic career is necessary. You must serve your novitiate."

"That sounds sensible," Fenton agreed.

"Now, I happen to know that the Vice-Consulship at Wilno is vacant. If you did a turn there you'd soon pick up the threads."

"I'm not sure that Stella would want to go back to

Poland."

"No reason why she should," remarked Sir George.

"You'd only be there a short time, and probably," he added with some cunning, "it would be better for the child's health if Stella and he remained in England. Anyway, at the present moment the Vice-Consul, a man named Martin Urquhart, is on sick leave, and there seems no prospect of his returning to duty just yet. The secretary is carrying on, but he's a Pole, I believe. It seems a pretty good spot for you to start a diplomatic career. You've been to Poland before, you speak the language, and it's not too far away for you to nip back for a fortnight's leave now and then. If you like I will put your name in with a personal recommendation."

"It's very good of you, and I am very grateful. I'll certainly accept the job if it is offered—providing, of course, Stella's agreeable," Fenton added in a rather shamefaced manner, as if he might be suspected of

being henpecked.

"Well, let me know."

"I'll ring you up directly I get back to the hotel, and many, many thanks. I'd no idea getting a job was so easy." Fenton shook Sir George warmly by the hand.

"Nonsense, my dear boy! It's no more than you

deserve."

When Fenton had gone the old man sat down at his desk and stared thoughtfully before him. After a moment or two he took off his pince-nez and slowly

began to polish them with his handkerchief.

"I wonder if I should be doing right," he murmured, "to send him out there. It may not be quite the easy-chair job he imagines it is. Still, I always like to use the best materials I possess for my tasks, and, after all, it is they that count, not the individual."

And the head of the Secret Service went across to the room where he had conveniently parked his previous

guest and recalled him into the office.

"Now," said Sir George, "we shall not be disturbed

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any more. Let's go into this case more thoroughly. Had Martin Urquhart any special friends?"

"Only one," replied the pale young man—" a woman,

Catherine Borodoshin."

"Anything known about her?"

"Well, we've got a good record as far as details are concerned since she came out of Russia. She is alleged to be the daughter of a White Russian officer, but her movements at times seem to hint that her sympathies might be directed the other way, though we've never

been able to prove anything."

Sir George nodded. It so often happened that the movements of the people in whom he was most interested were both peculiar and contradictory. An hour had passed in conversation with the pale young man when the telephone on Sir George's desk rang shrilly. He picked up the receiver to find Fenton speaking. Stella, it appeared, would be delighted if Fenton could get the appointment at Wilno. Sir George intimated that he would let Fenton know if there were any developments, cut short the latter's flood of gratitude, and rang off. A further hour passed before the pale young man took his leave. When the door had closed Sir George crossed to the map-case and took out a map of Poland. Having found the town of Wilno in the north-east corner, he stared thoughtfully at it, polishing his glasses the while, though they were perfectly clean.

"H'm," he murmured, "once belonged to Lithuania, and all that frontier was the cause of prolonged dispute. I dare say there are more placid Vice-Consulates than

the one at Wilno."

CHAPTER II

Keep Your Eyes Wide Open!

LAWRENCE FENTON'S appointment to Wilno was confirmed in due course, and he left England feeling as lighthearted as a schoolboy setting out for the holidays. If occasionally he experienced a twinge of remorse at the thought that he was leaving Stella behind he drew comfort from the fact that he had taken up this work at her request, and that she was quite capable of looking after herself. To be strictly truthful, there had been times recently when Fenton had been led to believe that his presence in his own household was not required. is a nasty pill for any man to swallow, and he confessed to himself that on the whole he was glad to be travelling on his own again. Stella and he had been seeing a lot of each other lately, perhaps too much, and a temporary separation would probably do them both good, while when he thought of the capable and efficient Nannie he decided that in her case the separation could quite well be made permanent.

At Wilno he found the Consulate, easily identified by the usual oval piece of bright yellow tin-plate which comprises the official Consular shield, situated in a solidly built house in a quiet street. The ground floor was used entirely for official purposes. Fenton had a large, pleasant room comfortably furnished, with a communicating door leading to the sanctum of Frantisek Wilenski, a Pole who had been acting Vice-Consul from the time Martin Urquhart had gone on leave until Fenton was installed. On the first floor of the building, reached by an old curving staircase with curiously carved

banisters, were Fenton's own private rooms.

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Fenton was able to write to Stella quite truthfully that he had fallen on his feet. Her reply, when it arrived several days later, showed rather a strange lack of interest in his activities, but there were several pages about what Nannie thought their son and heir ought to have. Fenton became aware of a faint feeling of resentment against his wife, and as to Nannie, he mentally consigned her to a hell composed of babies screaming shrilly, with every type of catastrophe to which the human young can fall victims.

Fenton found his new duties rather strange at first, but with the capable assistance of his subordinate he soon began to get a firm grip of the work. Frantisek Wilenski was a peculiar little person, short, but with broad shoulders and powerfully muscled arms and thighs, so that in this respect his trousers did not seem large enough for him. He had a pug-nose and a wide mouth, his black hair was cropped close to his head and stood up like a brush, and big, bushy eyebrows overhung his horn-rimmed spectacles. He was rather a silent person, though capable enough at his work so far as Fenton could judge. If occasionally he was a trifle curt in his manner Fenton put it down to a natural taciturnity.

Presently, however, a difficulty arose. Wilenski began to take too much upon himself. One or two points he decided on his own initiative, and did not bother to inform Fenton until after the matters were well in train. Fenton, uncomfortably aware that he was a new hand at the job and that he depended to a large extent on Wilenski's assistance, protested mildly that because of his official position he should have been consulted. Wilenski apologized, saying that he only wished to save his superior trouble, but he contrived to make his apology in a tone that suggested that he did not think Fenton capable of conducting the affairs efficiently.

Truth to tell. Frantisek Wilenski had formed a very poor opinion of the new Vice-Consul. Being himself a brisk, energetic, and ambitious type, he was contemptuous of Fenton's somewhat indolent attitude. humorous remarks with which Fenton sought to alleviate the more boring tasks he regarded as puerile. Fenton's monocle in particular annoyed him. He considered it, in conjunction with the fair hair brushed well off the forehead, as a sign of degeneracy. Like a good many other people before him, he had been completely misled by Fenton's outward appearance. It would have been difficult to find anyone who looked a more brainless dude, and yet was in every other respect so far removed from one. But Wilenski was blinded by his own judgment and his ill-concealed annoyance that he himself had not been appointed to Urquhart's place.

Before very long Fenton realized that his mild reprimand had little effect. Wilenski was usurping duties that were really Fenton's, and in two instances where Fenton's signature had been required the Secretary had appended his own version of it. His excuse was the need for haste, but Fenton realized that he would have

to be firm.

"You know as well as I do that neither of these cases was urgent. Even if they were, it is not as if I leave my office exactly at five o'clock, and if I did I am usually available upstairs."

"It saved you trouble," said Wilenski, regarding Fenton almost mutinously through his thick-lensed

spectacles.

"I do not wish to be saved trouble. I am here to do my job. Let us understand each other once and for all," Fenton continued. "It may be that you resent having over you an inexperienced and perhaps unorthodox person like myself, but I assure you it is not my fault, so please don't visit your disgruntled feelings on me. We

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shan't get on if we are at loggerheads all the time. There is another thing. Don't try to run me. I value your advice and experience, and you can be a very great help to me, but when it comes to making decisions it is I who must make them, not you. It is I who must give the final answer, and take the responsibility. Just remember that, please, and I think life will flow much more smoothly for both of us." Fenton grinned and added, "Now let's say no more about it. Have a cigarette?"

"Thank you, but I do not smoke." Wilenski gave a stiff little bow. "I am glad we understand each other,"

he said curtly, and left the room.

Fenton pulled a wry face at the door which shut off his own office from Wilenski's, and made a vain attempt to encircle an inkpot with a smoke-ring. "Mr Wilenski's feelings are hurt," he murmured. "Sulky little blighter." But nevertheless his dressing-down had its effect.

One morning Fenton was pleasantly engaged in reading one of the English newspapers which had just arrived by post when his stenographer entered bearing a card. Fenton hastily removed his feet from the mantelpiece and, assuming an attitude more in keeping with His Majesty's representative in a foreign country, took the slip of pasteboard.

"Gustav Kovell" he cried in amazement. "Show

him in immediately!"

A moment later a young man, whose lean white features were twisted into a friendly grin, was shaking Fenton warmly by the hand. They had not met for a long time, and when greetings and inquiries were over they settled down in armchairs.

"And how do you like your job here?" asked Kovel, after they had spoken of mutual friends and adventures which they had experienced together in the past.

¹ The adventures of Fenton and Kovel are described in the author's Room 14.

"Interesting and occasionally amusing," Fenton replied. "I'm getting the hang of it. Fortunately I've got a very useful subordinate."

"Wilenski? Oh, yes. He knows the routine. But don't you find it a trifle boring after your other

escapades?" Gustav's dark eyes twinkled.

"You forget I am a respectable married man nowadays. I am the wage-earner, the sole supporter of my

family, one of the world's workers."

"And you seem to be working very hard," chuckled Gustav, pointing to the crumpled sheets of newspaper which Fenton had hastily flung aside on learning the identity of his visitor.

Fenton smiled. "I was reading about that Russian spy trial. Extraordinary case. It's amazing how anxious the accused are to confess, especially when they must know that they've no chance of being acquitted."

Kovel nodded. "Yes. It's not natural, and all the prisoners cannot be as repentant as they appear to be." He smoothed back his long black hair. "And they are so ready to make their own cases worse."

"There must be some kind of third-degree method

used," Fenton suggested.

"Probably, but not as the ordinary person understands it."

"Not the American kind?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Is it drugs, do you think?"

Gustav shook his head. "I doubt it, though with all these new discoveries of ductless glands and the effect they have on a person's behaviour and character there may be something in it. No, I think it is more likely to be a mixture of psycho-analysis, psychology, and hypnotism."

"Well, it seems to be effective, if somewhat unpleasant," remarked Fenton. "I shouldn't care to be up

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against that sort of .thing. What are you doing with

yourself nowadays?"

Gustav lit another cigarette from the stump of his old one. "Oh, I work in a Government department in Warsaw," he replied casually. "I heard you had been appointed here as Vice-Consul, and as I was passing through I thought I'd look you up. Are you satisfied with things here?"

Something in the Pole's tone made Fenton glance at

him quickly. "Quite. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason other than a friendly interest," Gustav said quickly, but Fenton observed that he took care to keep his face averted. "If there is anything I can do to help you at any time let me know. I shall only be too glad. I'll give you my address and telephone number."

He scribbled on the back of his card, but when Fenton came to look at the pencilling he was surprised. He had a pretty sound knowledge of Warsaw, for in the past he had spent much time in the city, and this was not the type of address at which one would expect to find a man of Kovel's standing, nor was it in the district where most of the Government offices are situated.

Kovel must have sensed his friend's surprise, though Fenton had been careful to suppress it, for he remarked casually, "It's neither my office address nor my private address, but if you get into communication with it I shall always receive your message." He rose to his feet. "And now I must go, for I have a long drive back to Warsaw. It's been awfully jolly to see you again. We must meet later on."

Fenton put the card on the ledge of his desk and escorted his friend to his car. "Good-bye. Remember me to Stella when you write. Be good, don't overwork, and "—Gustav lowered his voice—" keep your eyes wide open!" He let in the clutch and slid away down the quiet street.

Fenton returned thoughtfully to his office and lit a cigarette. Gustav was very mysterious. First of all there was the curious tone in which he had asked if Fenton was satisfied with things, then that peculiar address, and finally the obvious warning as he drove away. What was he hinting it? Why couldn't he make a straightforward statement?

As Fenton stood with his back to the fireplace his gaze roved over his desk, until finally his eyes became fixed upon one object—Gustav's card, with his address scribbled on the back. Fenton stared. The card had been moved. He was almost certain of that. He had left it lying askew, with the bottom right-hand corner touching the line where the leather, let into the top of his desk, joined the polished wood. Now the card was half-way over that line. A small point, perhaps one with several perfectly good explanations; but more than once during his adventurous career Fenton had preserved his life because he had happened to observe small points.

The card could not have blown along the desk, for although the window was open there was no wind. Possibly a draught might have been created when he opened the door, and, as if to test that theory, at that moment his stenographer entered the room with the announcement that a Mlle Borodoshin wished to see him.

"Is she young and pretty?" Fenton demanded.

The stenographer grinned. She was getting used to her employer's eccentricities. "Well," she replied, "she's more than twenty-one, but she is tall and—er—fine-looking."

"Oh, show her in, then," said Fenton, who had made a working arrangement with the girl that all the less prepossessing visitors were to be unloaded on to Wilenski.

As the girl closed the door behind her Fenton stared at Gustav Kovel's card. There was no suspicion of any

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disturbance of the atmosphere, and the card did not move.

Fenton raised his eyebrows, and then, moving over to his desk, put on an austere official expression and pretended to be vastly busy with a pile of correspondence. When his visitor entered he shot her a quick appraising glance as he indicated a chair. She was a well-built woman in the early thirties. There was a striking, almost challenging expression about her dark eyes, and the firm set of her chin hinted that she was not one to be thwarted lightly. Fenton observed that she wore no rings, that her face was innocent of make-up, and that her eyebrows were as nature and not the beauty specialist had made them. He drew a memorandum pad towards him.

"Your address?" he asked politely.

The woman hesitated, as if she would prefer not to disclose it, then, with a shrug of her shoulders and fixing

her dark eyes intently upon him, she gave it.

She waited expectantly, as if she anticipated some comment from Fenton, and was disappointed because he only murmured the particulars to himself as he wrote them down on the pad.

"And in what way may I assist you?" he inquired.

She looked at him so intently that Fenton felt that she was trying to read his thoughts. "I really wanted to see Mr Urquhart," she replied.

Fenton explained that his predecessor had returned to England on sick leave, and that it was not known when

he would resume his duties in Wilno.

"But perhaps you could give me his address, so that I could write to him?" Catherine Borodoshin suggested.

"I don't know his address, but if you have any communications for him I can forward them to London for you. They will know his whereabouts."

The woman bit her lip, thought for a moment, and

then asked, "You didn't see him before you left England, I suppose?"

"No," replied Fenton, who was beginning to wonder

why she should show so much interest in Urquhart.

"But you can tell me the exact date when he left Wilno?"

"Not offhand, but Mr Wilenski will be sure to know. Excuse me a moment, and I will ask him."

Fenton rose and went to the door which communicated with Wilenski's room. He tapped and thrust his head round the corner. Wilenski was sitting at his desk.

"What date did Mr Urquhart leave Wilno?"

"What date?" repeated Wilenski. "Let me see. H'm. It's just escaped me. Isn't there a note of it somewhere? The stenographer should be able to find it."

"You might see to it, will you?" Fenton asked, and

withdrew into his own room.

"I shall be able to tell you in a moment," he continued, as he resumed his seat at his desk. "It was rather curious that my subordinate did not know immediately; an event of that kind ought to have stuck in his memory. Is there any way in which I can help you with regard to Mr Urquhart? What precisely is the object of your inquiry?"

"I thought it strange that he should leave so suddenly. He was rather a friend of mine." Catherine Borodoshin paused, and before she could continue Wilenski entered

the room.

As the Secretary's gaze fell on the visitor Fenton was certain that Wilenski gave a slight start before announcing that Mr Urquhart relinquished his duties on March the 16th.

"But do you know when he left Wilno?" The woman's voice sounded almost accusing in its tenseness.

"No, madam. That, of course, would be his own private affair." Wilenski bowed and withdrew.

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Fenton waited, wondering what his strange visitor would do next. She sat deep in thought for a time, and then, suddenly looking up and searching his face with her dark eyes, she said, "I suppose Mr Urquhart really did return to England?"

"That is what I understand."
"But you cannot be certain?"

"I have no proof, if that is what you mean."

"Yes," said Catherine Borodoshin slowly, as she rose to her feet, "that is what I do mean. I am afraid I've wasted a good deal of your time, but, believe me, I am grateful."

"I am sorry I cannot be of more assistance," said Fenton, as he opened the door for her. He walked slowly back to his desk, thinking to himself that she had conversed in a rather peculiar manner, but as he reached his chair he halted suddenly.

Gustav Kovel's card had been moved again.

He had left it so that half the card lay on the wood and half on the leather covering of his desk. Now only

one edge was touching the wood.

"Damn' thing must be bewitched!" muttered Fenton. He picked it up and put it in his case. His eyes turned to the door which led to Wilenski's room. "It may have been him the first time, or possibly the stenographer, while I was outside with Kovel, but on the second occasion it can be no one but Miss Catherine Borodoshin while I was talking to Wilenski and had my back to her. Seems to me Gustav's warning came in time. I wonder whether it was merely feminine curiosity, or whether there was some other motive? And why was she so very interested in Urquhart—if she was? All that may have been eyewash."

He lit a cigarette, thought for a moment, and then sauntered into Wilenski's room. "Do you know anything about that woman who's just gone?" he asked.

"Er—no," replied Wilenski, and for the first time Fenton noticed how the thick lenses of his spectacles made it difficult to read the expression of his eyes.

"But surely she's called before?"

"Yes, I believe she has. When Mr Urquhart was here."

For a moment Fenton contemplated taxing Wilenski with concealing something, but he knew it would be useless. He would have liked, too, to question him about Urquhart. From the way Catherine Borodoshin had asked her infernal conundrums she seemed to doubt very much whether the fellow was ill and in

England.

Fenton returned to his own room, sat down, and stuck his feet on his desk in a very unConsular attitude. The events of the morning required careful consideration, but an hour of profound thought did not produce any particularly brilliant results beyond half a dozen cigarette-ends in the ash-tray. The only conclusion Fenton could arrive at was that there was a peculiar undercurrent stirring. Kovel knew something about it, and Fenton would have telephoned to the address his friend had left, and in which other people seemed interested, but he realized that Gustav could not yet have covered the two hundred odd miles to Warsaw. Catherine Borodoshin was an enigma too, with her anxiety—there was no other word for it-about Martin Urquhart. When he came to think of it, Fenton knew extraordinarily little about Urquhart.

With a sigh he swung his feet off the desk and prepared to go to lunch. He was in one of those aggravating situations where it seemed that he was beset by mystery and provocative little problems, yet he could do nothing except wait. Many a time in his Secret Service career he had been in a similar quandary, and waiting was particularly annoying to one of his active temperament. But

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doubtless if he waited long enough something would

happen.

Something did, and he had not long to wait, for that evening, as he was in his private room above the office, dutifully writing to Stella and trying not to feel indignant that he had already written two previous letters without getting any answer, the telephone bell rang. He picked up the receiver, and replied to a faint inquiry that it was Lawrence Fenton speaking. In faint, hoarse syllables his caller continued:

"Will you come at once? It is Catherine Borodoshin

speaking. Please come."

CHAPTER III

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THE voice faded.

"Are you there? Who is speaking?" cried Fenton, but only the humming and crackling common to telephones came through the receiver. He rang up the exchange and asked whence the call had come, but for some reason or other, probably because the operator was

busy, they could not tell him.

He put back the receiver and sat on the edge of the table which held the telephone, swinging a carefully creased trouser-leg and pondering deeply. Why should Catherine Borodoshin ring him up and appeal for his assistance in that urgent whisper? Would she have spoken like that when they had met only once, and then officially? Was she in any danger? Or was she trying not to be overheard?

Fenton delicately scratched the tip of his nose with the forefinger of his right hand. One of the first things that had occurred to him was that Catherine Borodoshin had not spoken at all, for it is easy to disguise one's voice on the telephone by whispering. If it was not Catherine, who was it? To whose advantage was it that he should go to her flat? Fenton's instincts as a Secret Service agent were aroused. If it was Catherine speaking she must have been in serious need of assistance to have telephoned him on so slight an acquaintance.

A slow smile spread over his rather vacant face, a smile of pleasurable anticipation. His devil-may-care, buccaneering attitude towards life, which he had sought to suppress since his marriage, began to rise to the surface. His ruling passion, that unconquerable zest for adventure

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to which the spice of danger had been added, and which he could no more resist than the average child can refuse cream buns, was obviously going to prevail. Perhaps somewhere in the next hour or two lay the answer to the problems which had worried him that day—Gustav Kovel's warning and Catherine's peculiar interest in Martin Urquhart and in Kovel's address.

Fenton slid off the table and, opening a drawer in a bureau, picked up a small automatic, but after a moment's consideration he replaced it. He must remember that he was no longer a free agent, a person about whom nobody troubled. He had an official position nowadays, and it would not do for the British Vice-Consul at Wilno to be found in a brawl armed with a pistol. He grimaced and went into his bedroom. He did not like respectability, much preferring his old free-lance days.

He adjusted his monocle, straightened his tie, put on his green felt hat at a rakish angle, and emerged into the quiet street. He knew where Catherine lived, for he had had cause a little while before to visit the very road in connexion with his official business, and a quarter of an hour's swift walk brought him to a curious narrow thoroughfare paved with cobbles and lined on both sides with small, two-storeyed houses. He found the number, and discovered that the house was divided into two flats, of which Catherine inhabited the upper.

In answer to Fenton's knock a round-faced Polish maid came to the door and seemed distinctly doubtful about letting the strange caller enter, for it appeared that her mistress was out. However, Fenton's disarming smile, a good tip, and his assurance that he was expected removed her suspicions, and he was shown into a tiny lounge, where the maid, after another dubious stare, left him to his own devices.

Fenton looked round the room with interest. It

was illuminated by a soft pink light in the low ceiling, and its furnishing, besides being comfortable, showed considerable taste. A revolving bookcase contained sufficient good books to indicate that Catherine's discrimination in literature was above the average, while her knowledge of languages was also evident, for there were volumes in Polish, German, French, and Russian. Fenton picked out one or two with the intention of gleaning possible information from inscriptions, but in every instance the fly-leaves had been removed, or penknives had been used to scrape away any writing on the inside of the cover.

There were only two pictures on the walls, both etchings, one of the Ostra Brama, an old city gate of Wilno which contains a chapel, a sacred spot to all religious Poles, and a particularly clever work depicting the Church of St Anne, a fourteenth-century building. On the narrow shelf above the small stove were an open packet of cigarettes, a small vase of flowers, a clock, and two photographs. Fenton examined the latter carefully. The smaller, in a silver frame, showed a middle-aged man in the uniform of a Russian officer of pre-Revolution days, and from a striking resemblance to Catherine it seemed reasonable to deduce that it was either her father or an elder brother. The second portrait was of the head and shoulders of a youngish man, whose unsmiling countenance, sharp features, and shrewd eyes gave an impression of ferret-like characteristics; a sharply pointed but somehow pugnacious chin indicated, if further indication were needed, that he was not the kind of person easily to relinquish any course upon which he had set his mind. At the foot of his photograph was written "Ever and Aye, Martin."

Fenton stared speculatively at the picture, for it seemed more than probable that this was a portrait of his predecessor. Perhaps he had wished to break off his

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friendship with Catherine, and had purposely left no address nor communicated when he had gone away. He looked as though he might be that kind of a fellow, but one could never be certain of character as deduced from mere features.

Having exhausted the possibilities of the lounge, Fenton sank into the soft depths of a settee and prepared to wait. An hour passed. The maid, presumably, had gone to bed. The minute hand of the clock upon the shelf moved slowly round until it pointed to half-past eleven. A few seconds later he recognized the sound of a latch-key being inserted into the front door, then the door of the lounge opened and Catherine Borodoshin came to an abrupt halt on the threshold.

Her hand flew to her throat, and she gave a stifled gasp, so that it did not need the surprised whisper of "You!" to tell Fenton that his presence was unexpected. Presumably, then, the telephone message had been a fake. In an instant he made up his mind not to give away that information, but to find some other excuse for his visit. He stared owlishly at Catherine and blinked.

Catherine closed the door and came forward into the room.

"Why are you here?" she demanded.

Fenton smiled fatuously, dropped his monocle, fumbled with it, and after an anxious struggle succeeded in emerging from the depths of the couch. "My d-dear Miss Borodoshin," he began, making a vague gesture with his monocle, "I felt that I could not allow our acquaintance to remain so brief and unsatisfactory. It would be most reper—repru—reprehensible of me. No gen'leman would behave in so disconcerting, I mean discourteous, a manner. Allow me."

He lurched forward and took from Catherine's shoulders the cloak which she wore over her evening gown. She stared at him with that level, straight look

which he had noticed earlier in the day. There was no hint of alarm in her expression. A woman, he thought,

who could very well take care of herself.

"Well?" she demanded, crossing the room and helping herself to a cigarette from the open packet on the shelf. Fenton began to fumble for matches, but his straying fingers took so long that Catherine produced her own lighter from her handbag. Fenton gave up the search.

"I was dining with some friends near here, and thought it would be amica—amorous—no—I mean friendly, to call in." He stood regarding her with an amiable grin, swaying lightly from heel to toe.

"Yes, I guessed you had been dining," remarked Catherine drily. "But don't you think this is a trifle late for a gentleman to call upon a lady when they both

consider themselves respectable?"

Fenton followed her glance towards the clock, although he seemed to have some difficulty in focusing his frowning gaze upon the instrument. "Yes, I s'pose it is. I must be going." He turned, staggered a little, and at the third attempt gathered up his stick and hat. Catherine watched him unmoved.

"Thank you very much for a mos' enjoyable evening," Fenton continued, bowing with such old-fashioned courtesy that he had difficulty in retaining his balance.

"I 'preciate your kindness immensely."

Catherine opened the door for him, and after a preliminary collision with the door-post he descended the stairs, singing softly to himself. Catherine ran to the window of her lounge, having first taken the precaution of switching off the light, so that she would not be in silhouette, and, without disturbing the drawn curtains, applied her eye to a tiny gap. She saw Fenton tack uncertainly across the cobbles and vanish into the dark mouth of an alleyway. She continued watching, for she

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was uncertain whether Fenton knew where he was going, and half expected him to emerge again. But instead two shadows detached themselves from adjacent doorways and plunged silently into the alley on Fenton's heels.

Catherine waited a few moments longer, then switched on the light. She was puzzled to know what to make of these mysterious movements. Had Fenton been previously followed, and had he made use of her flat to throw his pursuers off the trail? In that case he had been unsuccessful. But who were the men who were following him? She stood in the centre of her little lounge, staring round her. Her things did not seem to have been touched. After all, why should they have been? Fenton was a gentleman and a responsible official, but even those got drunk sometimes. Fortunately he had been easy to handle, and had been neither amorous nor obstinate. She must hear what her maid had to say in the morning.

As for Fenton, he continued his unsteady gait for a while before resuming his normal method of progression. His mind was busy with the night's events. Why should it be to anyone's advantage that he should spend a considerable time at Catherine's flat? For it was obvious now that she had never telephoned him. Did some one want to get him out of the Consulate for an hour or so? The thought made Fenton quicken his pace, but before long he became aware that he was being followed. There were few people in the streets at this hour, but more than once when he cast a surreptitious glance behind him he could see two dim figures some distance away.

A faint grin spread over Fenton's features. This was almost like the old days. It would be amusing to accost his pursuers. Without giving any indication that he was aware of their existence he turned a corner and

slipped into the deep embrasure of a convenient doorway. In a surprisingly short time—in fact, they must have been running to accomplish the feat—two men came swiftly into the street and passed Fenton in his shadowy hiding-place without observing him. But soon their progress became slow and hesitating. They peered eagerly into the darkness past the pools of yellow light shed by the street lamps. Fenton slipped from the doorway and walked quietly up behind them as they stood upon the pavement.

"Where can he have gone?" muttered one man.

"He can't have had time to reach that far corner."

"What does it matter?" replied his companion. "We know who he is and where he has spent the evening."

"Yes, but if he has paid another visit to any of these

houses we ought to find out which one."

"Oh, don't be so conscientious. Let's go home to bed. We can always get on to him again another day. At least we've made sure about him visiting the Borodoshin woman." The speaker stifled a yawn.

"Well, he seems to have disappeared," muttered the

other man uneasily.

"On the contrary," remarked Fenton in a quiet voice behind them.

Both men spun round as if they had been shot, and

stared at him with open mouths.

"I assume you are looking for me," Fenton continued amiably, "since you have been following me for some time. I am afraid I cannot compliment you on the way you have carried out your task. Your shadowing was far too obvious."

He came forward and stared hard at the two silent and crestfallen men.

"I don't know who you are, or why you should want to follow me, but since it is getting late and one of you at least is longing for his bed, let me assure you that I

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am paying no more visits. I am going straight home. Good night."

He left them still staring at him. As he turned the far corner he looked back and saw that they were

engaged in fierce argument.

When he reached the Consulate he gave the offices and his private room a thorough search, in case some one might have been doing a little investigation work during his absence. Nothing, however, had been disturbed. In a completely puzzled frame of mind he had a final whisky and soda and went to bed.

His duties went hardly with Fenton the following morning. In spite of strenuous attempts to concentrate on official business, his mind persisted in harking back to the events of the previous day and night. Not that he got any further enlightenment by worrying over them, for nothing seemed to fit in, but two possibilities occurred to him. The first was that Catherine Borodoshin might be a good deal other than she pretended to be, and the second was that that inveterate old schemer Sir George Fawley, for all his apparent frankness at their last interview, might quite easily have had some ulterior motive in securing for Fenton the Vice-Consular appointment at Wilno.

"He's a wily old devil," murmured Fenton at length, thrusting his papers aside and putting his feet on the desk. "He'd have guessed that if he'd put the proposition to me as a pukka Secret Service job I'd have jibbed, because, with Stella and the kid to look after, I don't want to take any risks; so he might easily have worked it in this roundabout fashion. That would account for Urquhart going on sick leave, of course, but what does Sir George expect to gain by chucking me into the show blindfold, unless he hopes that once in I shan't back out? I'm not so sure, though." Fenton frowned. "He knew I wanted a quiet post. Serve him right if I did turn it

up. He'd certainly be annoyed, for he's a ruthless old devil where his job is concerned. Still, I am not sure that there is anything going on behind the scenes yet, but I've a damn' strong suspicion." He lit a cigarette and watched a smoke-ring ascend slowly towards the ceiling. "Even if Urquhart was recalled that doesn't explain why he has left Catherine Borodoshin in the air, as she seems to indicate. I wonder if he's the sort of low-down blighter who'd do that? Anyhow, if he gives her signed photographs with 'Ever and Aye' written on them and doesn't mean it he must be a damn' fool, and he doesn't look that either."

Fenton's train of thought was interrupted by the entrance of his stenographer with the announcement that Catherine Borodoshin wished to speak to him. He gave a low whistle of surprise, and told the girl to show her in.

Catherine greeted him with a friendly smile, and Fenton could not help thinking that the more he saw of her the more he liked her. There was something so straightforward and honest about her. Her strong, upright figure and level, unflinching look was very different from the quick, bird-like glances which so many women assumed.

"I am afraid," Fenton began, as soon as they were alone, "I owe you an apology for last night."

"It was nothing," Catherine replied, her dark eyes

twinkling.

"Would you," Fenton said, "feel very insulted if by way of reparation I suggested we lunched together?"

"Insults like that leave me unmoved. I should be

delighted to accept."

Within a few moments Fenton had asked his stenographer to sidetrack all business on to the unfortunate Wilenski and had brought his car round to pick up Catherine. They drove to one of the more fashionable

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restaurants, and Fenton, who was considerably experienced in these gastronomical matters, carefully chose the best possible lunch. During the meal they spoke casually of various subjects from the international situation to the unpleasantness of cobbled roads, of which there were many in Wilno. Fenton tried several times to insinuate a question which might have produced information about his guest, but he found that all his thrusts were skilfully parried. At the end of the meal he knew no more about Catherine Borodoshin than he had done at the beginning.

They adjourned to the lounge for coffee and cigarettes. Fenton, besides the admiration he had already formed for her, realized that in Catherine he faced an opponent worthy of his steel. At the same time his innate caution and the well-proven adage of the Secret Service, "Suspect

everybody," warned him to move with care.

"By the way," he said, as he held a lighter to Catherine's cigarette, "for what reason did you call on me this morning?"

"For one thing, to ask if there was any particular

reason why you called on me last night."

Fenton gave a shamefaced grin. "I must renew my apologies. I am afraid I dined not only wisely, but too well."

Catherine made no comment, but after regarding him quietly for a moment she said, "My maid was absolutely certain that you were quite sober when you arrived; otherwise she would never have allowed you in."

"Please don't blame your maid," interrupted Fenton.

"It was not her fault. I have a way with maids."

"So it seems. She also told me that you said I was expecting you. Now you know that was not true." Catherine spoke as if she was disappointed at discovering that Fenton had lied.

Fenton did not reply, and to avoid her gaze studied

the end of his cigarette. Catherine waited a full minute before she asked quietly, "Why did you come? Was it to search my flat? If so, you must have done it very cleverly, for I found nothing disturbed."

It struck Fenton as curious that she should ask this question. It sounded as if it would not have been the first time that her flat had been examined. However, he said nothing, except to protest that he had looked only at the titles of her books and the two photographs.

"My father and Martin Urquhart," explained Cather-

ine briefly.

"So you are a Russian?" Fenton asked, remembering the Imperial uniform.

"Yes."

There was an uneasy pause, as if her nationality made a difference. Presently Catherine spoke again, turning towards him and looking him straight in the face. "Don't you think it would be better if we were quite frank with each other? Exactly why did you call last night, and were you really as intoxicated as you made out?"

Fenton glanced up and caught the smile hovering about her lips. Immediately he knew she had seen through his subterfuge, which no doubt was why she had shown no animosity towards him. "No, I am afraid it wasn't a very good example of the histrionic art," he said slowly, and after a moment's consideration decided that he could do no harm in telling the truth about the affair, while he might possibly glean a little information in return. Thereupon he told Catherine about the telephone message.

"But I never telephoned!" she exclaimed.

"I realized that directly you came in. Hence my camouflage of an inebriated condition, the only excuse I could think of on the spur of the moment for being where I'd no business to be."

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"Why didn't you give me the true explanation?"

"Perhaps I should have done if I'd known you as well

as I do now," he parried.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Catherine, her dark eyes fixed on his face. "I've not said a word about myself."

Fenton chuckled. "Have you any explanation of the

telephone call?"

She shook her head, and contemplatively knocked

the ash from her cigarette.

"Do you know that you were followed when you left me?" she asked at length. "Two men were waiting outside in the shadows."

Fenton nodded, and explained how he had brought discomfiture upon the sleuths. "I was puzzled to know why they should be so interested in the fact that I had visited you." He paused, but Catherine made no comment. "It looks as if two sides—parties—call them what you will, were concerned. One party wanted me to call on you, hence the false telephone message, and the second party shadowed me to make sure that I had. That's as much as I can read into the riddle."

Catherine's face was grave as she traced invisible patterns on the table-top with a slim forefinger. "It is not unusual to be followed in Wilno, especially if you are a foreigner."

"But why pick on us two? We'd only met once before." Fenton leaned forward. "Did Urquhart have

a similar experience?"

Catherine nodded. "Many times, I believe."

Fenton removed his monocle and began to polish it

thoughtfully.

"I know what you are thinking," Catherine continued.
"I am the common factor in each case. Martin and I were—acquainted." Fenton wondered why she hesitated over the word. "He was shadowed. As soon as you met

me you were shadowed. Of course, I too have been watched."

Fenton did not reply for the moment. It was exactly what he had been thinking, and once again he was impressed by Catherine's grasp of the situation. There was no frivolous beating about the bush with her. She plucked the facts out of an argument and stood them boldly in the limelight. Indeed, there were occasions when Fenton thought that she was a little too frank, as if she were trying to impress upon him her integrity.

"It almost seems as if I am not nice to know, doesn't

it?" Catherine asked.

"I dispute that with the utmost vigour," Fenton retorted swiftly.

Catherine gave him a long, searching look. "That's a risky thing to say. You know so little about me."

"That can be remedied."

Catherine smiled and shook her head. Fenton contemplated the advisability of seeking further information about Catherine's relations with Urquhart, but decided that the position was too delicate. Urquhart had associated with her—been attracted by her if that photograph meant anything—had been shadowed, and had returned to England on the grounds of ill-health, a convenient phrase which possessed a multitude of meanings. It was not a matter which on their present footing they could discuss.

"Do you think it was the police who followed me so

inadequately last night?" he asked.

"I cannot tell."

"No more can I." Fenton rose suddenly. "Let me ask this bald-headed gentleman at the next table."

"In heaven's name why?" exclaimed the startled

Catherine.

"You'll see," chuckled Fenton, as he approached the man. "Excuse me, sir," he began politely, "but

I Am the Common Factor in Each Case are you a member of the police force, secret or otherwise?"

The man lowered the newspaper he had been reading and glanced up in astonishment. "The police, sir?

Certainly not! Why should I be?"

"Because," Fenton retorted coldly, "you have been trying so very hard to overhear the conversation between this lady and myself, and you had your eagle eye on us all through lunch in the restaurant."

Policeman or not, the man's self-composure was not proof against the accusation. He grew red in the face, and a crimson flush spread slowly over his bald head.

"Sir, you are insulting!"

"Insulting my foot!" said Fenton. "Twice you edged your chair nearer to us when you thought we weren't looking."

"This is an outrage!" the bald man spluttered.
"Then go and complain to the management."

With a muttered imprecation the man threw down his paper and departed in confusion and anger.

"And I hope you've strained your ear-drums," said

Fenton as a parting shot.

He rejoined Catherine, and though they waited a while, neither the aggrieved one nor the manager appeared.

"We must lunch together again," said Fenton, as he drove Catherine back to her flat, "and see if we can

attract any more policemen."

"Do you think it is wise if we are under surveillance?"

"I'll chance it," Fenton grinned.

She gave his hand a firm grip as she got out of the car.

"I enjoyed it immensely," she said, and added with a grave face, "Somehow I find you a very comforting person."

Fenton drove to the Consulate in a thoughtful mood,

and when he entered his office his stenographer approached him with an anxious expression on her face.

"Warsaw has been calling you, sir. The Embassy.

Shall I get them?"

"Oh, hell!" groaned Fenton. "What the devil do

they want? Yes, I suppose you had better."

While she was so engaged Frantisek Wilenski, the personification of disapproval, came through the communicating door, and glanced through his thick lenses at the clock on Fenton's desk, which showed twenty-five minutes past three. "The Embassy at Warsaw has rung up twice," he said. "They seemed annoyed that you weren't in. I could only say that you were at lunch."

"Did they say what they wanted?"

"No, but they indicated that it was an important matter."

"Embassy business always is, even if it's only an inquiry as to how many pen-nibs we've used in the last six months. Frantisek, old boy, beware of diplomats and their satellites. I've had some. They're all imbued with a sense of their own importance, especially the satellites. They think they make the world go round. Actually it revolves in spite of them."

Wilenski smiled weakly, for he disliked his superior's levity, and returned to his room, while Fenton waited

for the Warsaw call.

CHAPTER IV

The Sum of £5000 Will Be Paid for Information

At that moment the telephone on Fenton's desk tinkled shrilly. With a wry grimace he picked up the receiver.

"This is Fenton speaking."

"Oh, at last? Carson, one of the Embassy's odd-job men, this end. I've rung you up twice before, you know."

Mr Carson sounded a trifle annoyed, and even at a distance of two hundred miles his voice seemed to bear a distinct trace of that mysterious and indefinable thing the Oxford accent. Fenton made rude faces at the telephone. He hated that suave, haughty, and patronizing drawl, and visualized Carson as a spruce young elegant with a white, pasty face and beautifully brushed hair, much desired as a dancing partner by old ladies with badly suppressed instincts. Fenton had a poor opinion of the younger disciples of the Foreign Office.

"And now that you are back from lunch," continued Carson in superior tones, "I hope you had a good one."

To Fenton, already a little irritated by the accent, this was the last straw. "Listen here," he snapped; "I don't allow any five-bob-a-week office-boy to be humorous at my expense. Confine your conversation to business. I lunched very well, thank you."

A subdued and unrepentant chuckle came over the wire. "Well, you seem to have got a liver with it, anyway." Fenton writhed impotently. "However, H.E. wants to see you as soon as possible. How soon can you be here? I advise you to hurry even at the risk of indigestion. The matter is urgent."

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"You flatter me! So Ambassadors hang upon my lightest word, do they? Well, there's a train in two hours which gets into Warsaw late to-night. I take it H.E. won't want to miss his beauty sleep for my sake, so I'll call on him in the morning."

"Good enough. Where will you stay?"

It was on the tip of Fenton's tongue to say the Hôtel Europe, overlooking the great Pilsudski Square, but he remembered certain episodes in his past which had involved Alphonse, the head waiter in the *café*. It would be as well if Alphonse did not know that he was in Warsaw. Alphonse had been a useful agent, but he was apt to jump to conclusions.¹

"I'll put up at the Bristol," said Fenton.
"Good. I'll be on the look-out for you."

"Have you any idea what the row's about?" queried Fenton.

"Don't know. Discussion on the length of luncheon hours, I should think. Pleasant journey." And Mr Carson rang off before Fenton could think of a

sufficiently withering retort.

Fenton pushed the telephone aside petulantly. He wondered what His Excellency Lord Braxted could possibly want to see him about. It must be important if it was not to be trusted to a letter or the telephone, and if his Lordship found it necessary to drag a newly appointed Vice-Consul away from his work. Perhaps that last remark of Carson's had been a hint, and Fenton was to be reprimanded over some matter in which he had erred, Lord Braxted taking the view that it would be kinder to see him personally than to convey a rebuke by the blunt and cold-blooded medium of a letter.

A mutinous expression passed over Fenton's face. If he was to be hauled over the coals he'd chuck the job. He disliked the way Sir George had got him into it, when

1 The story of Alphonse is told in the author's Room 14.

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because of Stella and the child he had decided not to

take any undue risks.

His meditations were interrupted by the stenographer. The afternoon post had just arrived, and there was a private letter for Fenton. He recognized his wife's generous handwriting, and slit open the envelope. Stella, from the way she wrote, appeared to be a little disgruntled. The weather had been too beastly for words; nothing but rain and cold winds. Her friends seemed to have deserted her, for no one had been near the cottage for weeks. Worse still, the baby had caught a cold, and Nannie had said it was Stella's fault.

"Nannie would, the old vixen!" growled Fenton. "Almost looks as if Stella's becoming a bit of a whiner." He read on, murmuring the words to himself. "'You don't tell me much about your work or what you are doing in your spare time. Isn't there some useful subject you could study in the evenings which would help you on in your career?' Bottles of blood!" ejaculated Fenton. "What next? 'I do hope, however, you are sticking to it, for so much depends on your making good. I would remind you once again of our son's future, and, of course, you must not let down Sir George, who was so good in getting you the post."

Fenton exploded violently. "No, of course not. So damn' good of the scheming old devil to serve his own ends!" He hurried through the last few lines of the letter and tossed it on to his desk. "Why the hell is life so particularly exasperating just now?" he growled.

"How can I resign after that letter?"

He pondered a moment upon an anxious Stella, a snivelling and peevish baby, and a curt and domineering Nannie.

"Shouldn't I get a nice welcome," he murmured wryly, "if I turned up one day and announced I'd chucked the job? No, thanks! I'd rather stay in Wilno; and if I get

smudged out by some dirty dog on a dark night I'll put the blame on that perishing Nannie. She's the sort that drives men into the arms of loose women. Pious old cat!"

A quarter of an hour before it was time for him to leave for the station the stenographer entered his room with letters for his signature, while Wilenski wanted instructions for some business on the morrow. Fenton gave them while he rapidly wrote his name several times.

Wilenski planted his short, thickset figure on the hearth-rug and clasped his hands behind his back. "I wonder what His Excellency can want? It is most unusual for him to summon anyone to Warsaw. I hope," he continued in a priggish tone, "that he's satisfied with the way we conduct the Vice-Consulate."

Fenton glanced up at him quickly, but the thick lenses of Wilenski's spectacles seemed in some peculiar way to remove all expression from the man's face. "Are you referring to the fact that I did not return from lunch until 3.30?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Well, comfort yourself with the thought that if he isn't satisfied it is I who will get it in the neck, not you. There you are, Ermyntrude; that's the last letter. Now I must bolt."

Fenton rammed on his hat and grabbed his suitcase. "Good-bye, Frantisek. Don't get hitting the high spots while I'm away. Stick to milk and soda."

Wilenski gave a wan smile, and as Fenton reached the doorway the stenographer, smiling all over her face at the very idea of the sedate and conscientious Wilenski kicking over the traces, stood aside for him.

"And as for you, you minx," Fenton said, chucking her under the chin with his free hand, "be good if you

can, though it's more amusing to be naughty."

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Fenton's ill-humour had gone. The moods never lasted long, and were almost always due to his inability to find the answer to some problem. In due course he arrived at Warsaw and retired sleepily to bed at the Bristol.

After breakfast the following morning he made his way to the Embassy, and was met by a broad-shouldered youth whose face and hands were tanned a deep brown. The youth grinned cheerfully and gave Fenton a muscular grip.

"Good morning. I'm Carson, the five-bob-a-week

office-boy. Hope you've had a good journey."

Completely taken aback, Fenton was at a loss for words,

and Carson roared with laughter.

"You know, if all telephonic communications reached our high standard of wit—or abuse, if you prefer it—life

would be much more cheery."

"I must apologize," said Fenton. "Alas, another of my cherished illusions has gone west! I thought all hangers-on at Embassies were weedy lounge-lizards. Where did you get that tan? You look as fit as a fiddle."

"I am," replied Carson. "I've had three weeks' leave, and spent it climbing in the Tatras. But come along;

H.E. doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"I'm beat as to why he wants to see me," said Fenton, as they walked up the staircase. "Has his lordship any

peculiarities?"

"No, not really. He's a decent old stick, though he has some difficulty in coming to the point. He spent some years in the East, and I suppose he caught the com-

plaint out there."

The "decent old stick" inhabited a large room, into which Fenton was shown by a reverential private secretary. Lord Braxted came from behind a wide desk and shook hands warmly. He pulled up a chair, gave Fenton a cigar, and inquired about the journey. He was

a tall, spare man with a thin, aquiline face, grey eyes often veiled by heavy lids, and he was beginning to go bald, for there was an ominous patch on the top of his head which he had made an attempt to disguise by growing part of his grey hair long and brushing it across. He did everything he could to put Fenton at his ease, but despite the facile flow of his conversation and his undoubted charm of manner, Fenton felt like a man walking along a pleasant shore, yet uncertain when he would encounter a treacherous quicksand.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance," said Lord Braxted. "I like to meet all the Vice-Consuls personally if I can, but, of course, that is not always possible. You like your job, I trust, and find it interesting?"

Fenton admitted that he was beginning to grasp its

essentials.

"Very often much of the routine work is tedious, but that cannot be helped. You have a good staff? Wilenski

is helpful?"

"Yes," agreed Fenton, aware that he was growing a trifle hot under the collar. Why didn't the old ass get down to brass tacks? "He's a peculiar sort of fellow. Curt, you know. Reminds me of a very earnest lay reader. Very deficient in his sense of humour."

Lord Braxted nodded solemnly. "Still, so long as he does his work one mustn't grumble. Of course, you've been in Poland before, so it is not exactly a strange country to you. You spent some time in Warsaw a few

years ago."

"Ah," thought Fenton, "so you know that, do you?

That sounds like Sir George's information."

"I'm afraid you must find Wilno rather different," Lord Braxted continued. "A picturesque and historical city, but it hardly contains the delights and amusements of Warsaw. I suppose, however, you've been able to find some entertaining society?"

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"As a matter of fact, I've not really been there long enough," Fenton replied.

"But you know one or two people?"

"Yes," said Fenton, staring at him, and wondering

what the old blighter was getting at.

"Of course, of course," said Lord Braxted, removing the ash from his cigar and carefully avoiding Fenton's

gaze. "I was wondering-"

But Fenton was tired of this Oriental method of conducting business. He leaned forward and said deliberately, "Pardon me, Lord Braxted, but before we go any further I want to ask you one question. Did my predecessor, Martin Urquhart, really return to England because of ill-health?"

Lord Braxted coughed and moved uneasily in his chair, as if Fenton's abrupt question had unsettled his diplomatic calm. "Er—he was not altogether satisfactory as a Vice-Consul. I fear he did not confine himself strictly to Consular duties. There were—er—other things."

"Such as?" Fenton suggested.

A faint frown appeared on the Ambassador's smooth forehead. He did not altogether approve of being questioned in this manner. "His—er—social acquaintances were not judiciously selected," he replied coldly.

Fenton nodded, remembering Urquhart's photograph in Catherine's flat. "I see," he said, and launched a bombshell. "May I take it that Urquhart was sacked

because of his association with a certain lady?"

Lord Braxted raised a protesting hand, though whether he was protesting at Fenton's bluntness or at his use of a colloquial vulgarism it was difficult to decide. "Not—ah—sacked, my dear Fenton. No, not that." He gazed thoughtfully at the glowing end of his cigar, and then retaliated to Fenton's bombshell by throwing one back. "The truth of the matter is that

Mr Urquhart was last seen in the company of Miss Catherine Borodoshin, and has not since been heard of."

"You mean he has disappeared?" Fenton demanded.

Lord Braxted inclined his head. "You will readily understand, Mr Fenton, why I was a little perturbed when I learned of your association with the same lady."

"Who told you?" Fenton asked in an almost aggres-

sive tone.

Lord Braxted hesitated. He would have preferred not to answer that question, but he had sufficient acumen to realize that if he wished to enlist the co-operation of Fenton he must be frank. "Well," he answered uncomfortably, "our information came from the Polish police. Don't imagine for a moment that I, or anyone else, gave orders to have you watched," he added hurriedly. "It is not our custom to have our Vice-Consuls watched."

Fenton nodded, and then suddenly related how he had been followed from Catherine's flat the night of the false telephone message. "It looks," he concluded, "as if that was worked for the benefit of the police. Who worked it and why?"

Lord Braxted, whose raised eyebrows alone had showed

his surprise at the incident, shook his head.

Fenton grunted, and then asked, "I wonder if it was a policeman who was trying to listen to my conversation with Miss Borodoshin in a restaurant yesterday? I taxed him with it, and he didn't seem very pleased."

"I could find out for you," said Lord Braxted surprisingly, and picked up a telephone. "Get me 40961,

please."

Fenton barely repressed a start, for that was the number Gustav Kovel had scrawled on the back of his visiting-card.

"To be quite frank with you, Fenton," the Ambassador continued, "and at the risk of giving offence, I must

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say that the Polish police would not look with favour on any—er—friendship with Catherine Borodoshin."

"Why? Because of her connexion with Urquhart's disappearance? By the way, do you think Urquhart dis-

appeared of his own free will?"

"Well, we don't know what to think. He was a rather peculiar fellow. Secretive, and not too grateful for any advice which was offered him. Men have wished to sever all connexion with friends, relatives, and business and vanished into the unknown before now. On the other hand," Lord Braxted went on, "we do not know why anyone should wish to—er—remove him."

Fenton again remembered the photograph in Catherine's lounge and her apparent anxiety about Urquhart when she first visited the Consulate. If the fellow had absconded it was probable that Catherine would have

accompanied him.

"Did he vanish from Miss Borodoshin's flat?" Fenton asked.

"So far as we know——" The telephone bell rang, and Lord Braxted picked up the receiver. "40961? Can you tell me if Mr Fenton, Vice-Consul at Wilno, was watched by police at luncheon yesterday? All right. I'll hold on."

There was a pause. Then the Ambassador hung up the receiver. "No. They assure me that no one was watching you yesterday."

"Then who the deuce was he? There was no doubt that he wanted to hear what we were talking about."

The Ambassador shrugged his shoulders. "Let us return to Urquhart. He went to Miss Borodoshin's flat, as he so often did in the evening, and he has not since been seen."

"What date was that?"

Lord Braxted consulted a file of papers. "March the 15th," he replied.

"And you suspect Catherine Borodoshin of being concerned in the matter?"

"Aren't we bound to?" Lord Braxted turned over some papers in the file. "I have here a little information about her, which will perhaps explain why we were a trifle anxious when you became friendly with her." He began to read from the file. "'Catherine Borodoshin, born in Kiev, 1900, daughter of a colonel in a Russian cavalry regiment who was killed while fighting with Denikin's army against the Bolsheviks. No living relations in Russia known. Escaped from Russia to Poland in 1920. Lived for a time on jewellery smuggled over with her. From 1920 to '23 worked in a shop in Lemberg.' I won't bother you with addresses, but they're all here," said Lord Braxted, glancing up for a moment. "'In her spare time learned shorthand and typing and obtained a post in that capacity in 1924. In 1925 she tried teaching languages, but after a while returned to secretarial work. During the spring of 1926 she moved to Pinsk, still as a secretary, and was seen in the company of Boris Nikoloff.' He was a spy who found it healthier after a time to remain in Russia," interpolated "'Was watched, questioned, and the Ambassador. searched, but no evidence was found. Kept under surveillance for six months without result, at the end of which time she obtained a fresh post as secretary to a business man in Grodno. In 1927 she was a waitress in a café, saleswoman in a shop, and manageress of a club which was closed by the police, when she narrowly escaped prosecution. Afterwards it was discovered that the club had been used as a rendezvous for several international spies, and she was again put under surveillance, but without result."

Lord Braxted looked across at Fenton.

"I'm afraid she must have had a thin time. Foreign police are not like ours. She must have found jobs very

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difficult to get, and no doubt she left Pinsk because the police made things unpleasant for her. However, it's rather surprising to hear that she returned to Pinsk and remained there for five years in various capacities similar to the posts she had had before. On three occasions she was required to explain her movements to the police, and twice they searched her rooms."

"It occurs to me," commented Fenton, "that the Polish police are extremely suspicious and tenacious, and that Catherine Borodoshin is a very clever woman."

Lord Braxted nodded agreement. "If she was playing a game it was a very dangerous one. She must have known after her association with Nikoloff that the slightest error on her part would have gained her a heavy prison sentence. The Poles bitterly resent espionage, especially by Russia."

"When did she come to Wilno?" asked Fenton.

"She left Pinsk in 1934," replied the Ambassador, referring to his papers, "spent a year in Grodno again, and then went to Wilno, where she has remained. For the past few years she has contributed articles on various subjects to local papers and periodicals, and seems to have made a fair income. She often travels into the country for the purpose of gaining information on the local peasantry, their traditions and customs. Until Urquhart vanished the police had no further complaints to make against her. Of course, there are particulars of her height, weight, identification marks, and photographs, and all the usual police particulars, but from what I've said you will realize why I was anxious when I learned that you knew her, especially since she is linked up with Urquhart's disappearance."

"I quite understand," said Fenton thoughtfully. "I'll bet the police were anxious too. I don't suppose they like foreign Vice-Consuls disappearing from their country, and perhaps they thought I might vanish too.

I'm grateful for what you've told me. I'd put down Miss Borodoshin as a woman of more than ordinary intellect, but I must say she's got a very doubtful record."

"Yes. I thought a timely hint might prove valuable," said Lord Braxted, putting away the file of papers.

There was a pause. The interview seemed to have come to an end, but Fenton was not altogether satisfied. He crushed out his cigar and said gravely, "Lord Braxted, can you tell me if I was sent to Wilno as a genuine Vice-Consul or to investigate the disappearance of Urquhart?"

"First and foremost as a Vice-Consul," replied the other without hesitation, "but, of course, any information which may come your way concerning Urquhart

would be very acceptable."

"I'm not likely to learn much by sitting in my office,"

remarked Fenton evenly.

"No, but it may so happen that some little thing may crop up," said Lord Braxted, and added quite casually, "The Government are quite concerned about the matter, for I understand the sum of £5000 will be paid for information leading to the discovery of Urquhart."

"Good Lord, is he as valuable as all that?" Fenton

exclaimed.

"That's hardly the point," replied Lord Braxted severely, but he did not explain what the point was.

After a little more casual conversation Fenton took his leave, and found Carson outside with an invitation to lunch, though the secretary took care to add that his lunch-time did not extend until half-past three.

It was a pleasant meal, and they talked of everything except Fenton's interview. Afterwards Fenton returned to his hotel, and spent a long time considering his conversation with Lord Braxted. It occurred to him that now he was in Warsaw—he had decided to return to

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Wilno by a night train—a good idea would be to get in touch with Gustav Kovel, especially as the number Kovel had given him appeared to be a police number.

He rang 40961, and within two minutes Gustav Kovel was enthusiastically accepting an invitation to dinner. It was not until they were sitting over their coffee and liqueurs that Fenton, after a wary glance round to make sure there were no eavesdroppers, remarked casually, "It was good of you to warn me to keep my eyes open at Wilno, but you never told me why."

Gustav smiled, but did not reply.

"However, Lord Braxted gave me some very good reasons this morning. Do you, by any chance, know anything of Catherine Borodoshin?"

Gustav pursed up his lips. "I seem to have heard the

name."

"Or have you any news of Martin Urquhart?"

"Why should I?" Kovel glanced sharply at his host.

"Only because," Fenton grinned, "when Lord Braxted wanted news of police movements he rang up

40961."

Kovel shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "The man from whom no secrets can be hid. All right, I plead guilty. I'm in the unofficial police, if you like to call them that."

When they had discussed matters it was obvious that Gustav Kovel knew as much as Lord Braxted, but he gave Fenton rather more concise information about Martin Urquhart.

"He was a peculiar fellow," he began.

"Was?" Fenton queried sharply.

Gustav spread out his hands. "As you wish. Is or was; we don't know. He'd got a nose like a ferret, always poking it inquisitively here and there, and I think

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he learned some curious things. He never said much, but we all had an idea that he was going deeper into politics—the hidden-from-the-light-of-day kind—than was strictly in keeping with his official position."

"Was Miss Borodoshin mixed up with it?"

"I don't know. From her record it looks like her line, but she's a clever woman, and no one ever pinned anything down to her. There was another side of Urquhart's character too which we mistrusted. He used to mix with a Russian ex-monk and other unpleasant people and dabble in spiritualism and occult matters."

"Where's the monk?"

"Vanished about the same time as Urquhart and as completely. All we know about him is his name—Kaplov."

"What did you mean by Urquhart going deep into politics?" Fenton asked presently, for it occurred to him that this was the point which Lord Braxted had

not explained.

"Oh, you know how there are all kinds of rumours flying round and fanatical societies for the propagation of this and the frustration of that for patriotic reasons. Most of them end in hot air, but one or two don't. Some Powers would expect to benefit by trouble in this part of Europe, as you know well enough. The Lithuanian frontier has only just been opened after nearly twenty years. The Russian frontier is always uneasy, and Germany, with Nazis in Danzig and Memel and her eyes on East Prussia, isn't a very comfortable neighbour. Beneath a comparatively calm surface there are seething undercurrents, and Urquhart may have been caught in one of them."

"With Catherine Borodoshin performing her duties as a charming siren?" Fenton suggested.

"It is more than likely," agreed Gustav.

Fenton decided not to mention that Catherine had

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probably taken a good look at Kovel's visiting-card on the morning of her first visit. In the present state of affairs that act would probably be sufficient for her to be detained by the police, and Fenton considered that in the light of his new knowledge she might prove more useful if she were allowed her freedom.

CHAPTER V

Yes, He's a Rum Old Buffer!

Fenton proceeded to the station in a cheerful frame of mind, for his time in Warsaw certainly had not been wasted. His talk with Lord Braxted had opened his eyes considerably, and the additional facts which Gustav had provided were also likely to prove useful. He smiled to himself when he recollected Lord Braxted's casual reference to the £5000 reward. That sum would be extremely useful. Securely invested, it would make the education of his son Peter a simple matter. Fenton's grin widened, for it appeared to him extremely probable that a similar thought had come to the mind of Sir George Fawley. Yes, it was doubtless Sir George who had suggested the reward. Crafty old bird!

Fenton considered other aspects of the case, notably the one concerning Catherine Borodoshin. He felt very glad that he had been warned about the lady. In future she must be treated very carefully. As carefully as one handles a dangerous explosive. He had badly misjudged the situation, and had nearly made a fool of himself, and he felt distinctly annoyed. But at the same time if he wished to make use of her he must on no account let her suspect that he knew any more about her than before he went to Warsaw.

The station was comparatively quiet, but Fenton was so preoccupied with his thoughts that he quite failed to see an elderly gentleman, who was also not looking where he was going, until they bumped into each other. The elderly gentleman staggered back, grunting, and dropped a cascade of small change, tickets, and seat reservations. Immediately Fenton apologized and

Yes, He's a Rum Old Buffer!

assisted the victim to retrieve his property. The old

gentleman began to talk in voluble Polish.

"Indeed, sir, indeed," he said, "it was not your fault. I was day-dreaming. It is entirely the result of my own stupidity. Oh, thank you, thank you," he continued gratefully, as he took the articles Fenton had picked up. Promptly he dropped most of them again, and also a bundle of papers which hitherto he had managed to retain. He seemed flustered and a little nervous, as old people often are when travelling.

"I am afraid I have caused a considerable disturbance," murmured Fenton, again returning papers and tickets to their rightful owner and noticing at the same

time that he was travelling to Wilno.

The other was garrulously grateful for Fenton's assistance. "Most careless of me, most careless," he muttered. "I am becoming a very stupid old man."

Fenton handed him the last of the bundle of papers, which he observed were mainly scientific periodicals, prevented an umbrella from falling to the ground, and again asserted that the affair was entirely his fault. "Not at all, not at all," said the other, blinking at him in a bewildered manner, "but may I trespass further on your kindness and ask if you can direct me to the train for Wilno?"

"As a matter of fact, I am going there myself," Fenton smiled. "I think this is the platform." He led the way, the other following with protestations of

gratitude.

"Funny old buffer!" thought Fenton. "Ought to have a nurse. Quite as likely to finish his journey in Stamboul as Wilno. Probably fall out of the window during the night. Hope he's not in my compartment."

Fenton was spared the latter catastrophe, for the sleeping-car attendant, after some small argument, coaxed the old gentleman into a reservation next but

one to Fenton, to the undisguised amusement of a portly German. Fenton settled down, distinctly pleased to discover that he would have no one in his own compartment, as the second berth had not been taken. He lit a final cigarette before turning in, but his solitude was rudely disturbed by a knocking on the door which led to the corridor. He opened it to find his former acquaintance outside.

"Ah, my dear sir, I observed that you had nothing to read," exclaimed the old gentleman, "so I have taken the liberty of bringing you one or two papers which I shall not require. Perhaps I had better introduce myself. I am Professor Malakoff, late of the Imperial College, Moscow." He gave a slight bow. "A long time ago, I fear, but what would you? Times change."

Fenton exhibited polite gratitude, took the proffered papers, and could not very well avoid asking the Professor to sit down and giving him his own name.

"Oh, an Englishman?" said the Professor, making himself comfortable and accepting a cigarette. "You understand Polish well."

"A little. So long as people don't talk too fast."

"A great country, England, a great country!" mused the Professor. He smoothed his grey, tobacco-stained moustache with long, thin fingers, and his blue eyes regarded Fenton interestedly from beneath their frosty brows. "Are you, by any chance, a scientific man? No? A pity. One or two of these papers are scientific journals. I am acquainted with various branches, and I have always regretted that my studies in Moscow were so rudely brought to a conclusion. However, one must make the best of life."

"What is your special subject?" Fenton asked, more from politeness than from anything else.

"I have many, many. Lately I have been conducting

Yes, He's a Rum Old Buffer!

experiments into spiritual phenomena. A most entertaining branch of science. I have made a close investigation into ectoplasm, and, indeed, have published a small brochure. It is difficult work, and very trying for the medium."

"I take it you believe in what is commonly called

spiritualism?"

"Oh, most certainly! How can one doubt when such eminent men have professed their belief? In your own country, for instance, Sir Conan Doyle, Sir Oliver Lodge, and many others. I know there are evil people who prey upon the credulous, but that is only human nature."

"I do not think," said Fenton, "that spiritualism is a safe matter for the general public. Maybe when mediums and mechanical means can be dispensed with—"

"Ah, that may come," the Professor interrupted. "No one can tell what strides will be made. Much has been done by means of trances, and many interesting experiments have been carried out in hypnotism, a branch which has not received the attention it deserves. I truly believe that in a short time—shorter, indeed, than some of us may imagine—hypnotism will be found to be the path of approach to many secrets of nature. The subconscious mind is still largely a hidden secret; that secret may well be exposed by means of hypnotism. It is an immense subject, and although much has been done, we are still only on the fringe of it."

While the Professor had been speaking Fenton had noticed the curious compelling keenness of his eyes. They were of an unusual light blue, which gave them that peculiar blind look which some people possess, and which in so many cases acts as a cloak to their real feelings. Fenton experienced an intense desire to look anywhere except at those compelling orbs, yet again

and again he could not resist the temptation to take

one more glance at them.

"But I am robbing you of your sleep," continued Professor Malakoff. "I beg of you to forgive an old man's garrulity. I have tried your patience too much to-day already. I bid you good-night." He gave a quick little bobbing bow, and returned to his own compartment, where the stout German was already in bed lying flat on his back and snoring loudly.

Fenton undressed slowly and meditated on many things, but no sooner had his head touched the pillow than he was asleep. He was used to travelling, and the roar and rattle of the train did not disturb him.

Some time later he woke up with a sudden feeling of panic. The speed of the train had slackened. Only the usual dim blue light illuminated the compartment, and he peered round, expecting to see some shadowy figure. He leaned on one elbow, steadying himself with one hand on the wooden edge of the bunk against the rocking of the carriage, and tried to collect his scattered senses. He must have had a nightmare. What did he dream? Frowning with the intensity of his efforts to think back, he vaguely remembered that as he woke he seemed to have heard the slam of the compartment door as it slid into place. That, possibly, would account for his expecting to find an intruder.

He was now thoroughly alert and convinced that something unusual had happened. Switching on the light, he lit a cigarette just as the train began to stop at a station. He glanced at his watch, which showed that he had been asleep nearly three hours. He had quite lost the feeling of panic which had been so strong when he had first opened his eyes, but from the back of his mind had come the suggestion that while still asleep he had been using his hands to push away or ward off

something which had worried him.

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What could it have been? He lay back among the bed-clothes and stared thoughtfully at the bottom of the empty bunk above him. The train had stopped, and outside the shuttered windows he could hear the muffled voices of porters and passengers. Automatically his eyes, attracted by the light, moved round until he was staring at the electric bulb in the roof of the carriage. He blinked, and then, with a muttered exclamation, sat up. His nightmare had been about that or some other light. Yes, that was it. A fierce bright light emanating from one narrow spot, which had bored its way into his brain and seemed to deprive him of his will-power. He had fought against it instinctively, using his arms as a shield.

He fingered his chin reflectively. The dream was particularly vivid. Furthermore, it was unusual, and there seemed to be nothing to account for it. The slam of the corridor door too had appeared very realistic. With the idea that a thief might have entered the compartment, he rose and searched his clothes, but everything was just as he had left it, and his wallet and money were intact. The train moved on with a sudden jerk. Fenton, still uneasy and puzzled, returned to bed, to sleep lightly until it was time for an early breakfast.

When the train drew up at Wilno and Fenton descended on to the platform he saw that Professor Malakoff had already alighted, apparently without mislaying any of his possessions, and was making his laborious way through the crowd. It struck Fenton as curious that Malakoff, previously so polite and punctilious, should leave without a formal good-bye. And then, just beyond Malakoff, and approaching face to face, Fenton saw the tall, upright figure of Catherine Borodoshin. Some instinct warned Fenton to stand motionless. He watched the two people as they drew

near to each other through the crowd. Suddenly Catherine's eyes fell on the Professor, and she started violently.

"She knows him," thought Fenton. But apparently she did not, for she passed him by, saw Fenton, and with a quick smile of pleasure came towards him with outstretched hand.

"Hello! What are you doing here? I'd no idea you

were going away."

Fenton explained that he had suddenly been called to Warsaw, but if he expected her to show any anxiety at the statement he was disappointed.

"Well, it was quite a coincidence that I happened

to be at the station," said Catherine.

"Was it?" thought Fenton. Had she come to meet Malakoff, and then when she saw Fenton ignored the Professor? But Fenton could have sworn that she had seen Malakoff first, in which case Malakoff himself must have warned her.

"A very pleasant coincidence; in fact, a delightful one," Fenton said aloud, and turned to find Professor Malakoff at his elbow.

"I have to bid you au revoir," said the old man. "Doubtless we shall meet again; indeed, we must."

"I hope so," said Fenton. "Allow me. Miss Boro-

doshin, this is Professor Malakoff."

They shook hands, while Fenton watched Malakoff's expression. But the Russian gave no indication that he had seen Catherine before, nor, for that matter, did

she appear to know him.

"I am delighted to meet you," he said. "I have come to your beautiful Wilno because I have some researches to make in the library of the University. I trust I shall have the pleasure of improving our acquaintance. And now, if you will pardon me, I must hasten away. Au revoir to you both."

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And he hastened away, leaving his umbrella on the

platform, so that Fenton had to run after him.

"What a courteous old gentleman!" said Catherine when Fenton returned. "It almost seems as if he belonged to another age."

"Yes, he's a rum old buffer!"

"I should like to see more of him. I should think he's a most interesting man to talk with. One of those people so rare in this hurried modern life, who regard conversation as more than a succession of clipped

phrases composed mainly of slang."

"Oh, he can talk all right," chuckled Fenton, remembering Malakoff's scientific dissertation of the previous night. A sudden thought struck him that hypnotism had been one of the subjects mentioned. Perhaps that accounted for his peculiar dream, for he recollected that in the practice of that somewhat hazardous science a bright light is often used. Had that information been utilized by his subconscious mind?

"I think it would be a good idea if you brought him along to my flat to tea one day," suggested

Catherine, and Fenton agreed.

He collected his car from a garage near the station, gave Catherine a lift to the street where she wished to do some shopping, and drove on to the Consulate. As he made for his office his stenographer greeted him with a smile and a prim good-morning. Fenton stopped and pointed an accusing finger at her.

"Were you good?" he demanded.

"Of course," said the girl, remembering his parting words of advice.

"How dull!" commented Fenton, and passed on.

Frantisek Wilenski soon made his appearance, and inquired how his superior had fared. Fenton replied that everything had passed off smoothly, but gave no

further account of his visit, to Wilenski's obvious dis-

appointment.

Fenton found routine work extremely trying. Concentration became an effort, for all the time his brain was occupied with the numerous facts bearing upon the disappearance of Martin Urquhart. Catherine was obviously the focal point of suspicion, and she knew something about the elderly Professor Malakoff. Before very long it occurred to Fenton that a little information about the Professor might prove valuable. He called his stenographer, and told her to put a call through to Warsaw and get 40961. Several minutes later he was speaking to Gustav Kovel.

"Can you tell me anything about a Professor Mala-koff, late of the Imperial College, Moscow?" he asked.

"I'll see what can be done. Any further details?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. He's an elderly man, very keen light blue eyes, tall, but stoops; you know, the rounded shoulders of a scholar. Travelled from Warsaw to Wilno on the same train as I did last night. Has some research work to do at the University here. Scientific. Interested in spiritualism and hypnotism. Oh, and he's written a brochure on ectoplasm."

"Ecto-which?" asked Gustav.

"Ectoplasm—the doings which comes out of mediums and forms funny faces."

"Funny faces to you," retorted Gustav. "All right.

I'll see what I can do."

Fenton continued his work, and it was not until late in the evening that Gustav rang him up.

"Any luck?" asked Fenton.

"In bits," came the reply. "There is or was a Professor Malakoff from Imperial College, Moscow, but he doesn't fit in with your pal. He was short, with a dark beard, and his subject was advanced chemistry. Incidentally, we can trace no brochure on ectoplasm by

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a Professor Malakoff, and if there was one I'm certain we'd have found it. I didn't disturb Wilno University. Thought you could check that."

"Yes, I will," said Fenton. "Many thanks."

He replaced the receiver thoughtfully. There might be two Malakoffs, both Professors of the Moscow Imperial College, but it was unlikely, and it certainly seemed as if his acquaintance of the train had told a lie with regard to his brochure on ectoplasm. A small point, but many a murderer has been hanged because of his failure to account for small points, and it was quite sufficient to make Professor Malakoff a suspicious character.

The following day Catherine telephoned Fenton to suggest that he and Malakoff should come to tea, and this gave Fenton the opportunity to get in touch with the University authorities, for neither he nor Catherine knew the Professor's address. There was no doubt about Malakoff's conducting researches at the University library, for the officials had given him every facility, and they were able to furnish Fenton with the name of his hotel. The old gentleman announced his delight at the invitation, so Fenton called for him in the car, and together they drove to Catherine's flat.

Tea was laid on a low table by the settee, on to which, after polite greetings, the Professor cautiously lowered himself. The tiny lounge appeared larger by daylight, and Fenton gave a reminiscent smile as he remembered his last visit. Now that he knew his hostess's history he found her even more interesting than before, and, watching her as she chatted to the Professor, he felt he would have given a good deal to know in what circumstances she had seen the old man previously. For Fenton was sure that she had. That start of recognition at the station had been too obvious.

Fenton had not been in the lounge more than a few

minutes before he noticed that the photograph of Martin Urquhart had been moved from the mantelpiece, and now stood on a small occasional table by the side of the Professor. When the maid brought in the tea Catherine moved the table so that her guest could place his cup upon it, but she did not take away the photograph. Rather, as Malakoff's gaze fell upon the portrait, it seemed to Fenton that she watched his face anxiously, as if she expected he would make some remark. Malakoff, however, merely glanced at the photograph and made no comment, and Catherine was undoubtedly disappointed. The incident would not have been observed by an ordinary person, but Fenton had trained himself to notice such things, and, if he could not arrive at a satisfactory explanation, to store them away in his mind for future use.

Certainly the Professor was an excellent conversationalist, and during the two hours of his visit there was not a dull moment. When finally he rose to go Fenton offered to drive him to his hotel, rather to Catherine's disappointment, for it was obvious that she wished Fenton to remain behind. Fenton, however, had other ideas. He resolutely took his departure, and as soon as they were in the car suggested that Malakoff should come to his rooms for a drink and a cigarette.

Malakoff, it appeared, did not drink, but he would be delighted to smoke a cigarette. Fenton took him up to his own apartment, settled him in a comfortable chair with a box of cigarettes at his side, and encouraged him to talk. Fenton knew from experience that very often if you could only get a man to talk enough he would quite unwittingly let slip some casual remark which might well prove of inestimable value. The remark about the brochure on ectoplasm was proof of this. Perhaps the Professor would give some clue to his recognition by Catherine.

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The time passed. Malakoff sat hunched in his chair, smoking ceaselessly and conversing most entertainingly on all kinds of matters. Gradually he began to speak more and more of what were apparently his favourite subjects—hypnotism, psycho-analysis, psychology, with a dash of spiritualism thrown in. Fenton purposely gave the impression that he was a sceptic, and ridiculed a good deal of what he called "pseudo-scientific bunk." Malakoff, politely ignoring the fact that he was dealing with a comparative ignoramus, patiently strove to drive home his argument by quoting convincing examples.

The daylight faded. Deep shadows crept about the room. Malakoff was no more than a vague humped figure, the glowing end of his cigarette making a tiny red point which moved up and down in the gathering

darkness as he emphasized some point or other.

At first Fenton watched it idly, but gradually his eyes followed its movements closely, until he found it required quite an effort for him to take his gaze from

it. He closed his eyes for a moment.

"But I find it very difficult to believe," he argued, letting his eyes wander round the room, "that one person can so impose his will upon another that the latter becomes entirely subordinate to him. It doesn't seem feasible. Besides, although I have heard of any number of people who claim to be able to hypnotize anyone, I have never yet met a single one of them that has really been able to do so."

"It is, scientifically speaking," Malakoff retorted, "a comparatively simple matter if the operator has the

requisite technique and the subject is willing."

"But if the subject is not willing?"

"Then it is more difficult, but not impossible. The relative power of both persons' minds is of supreme importance. Of course, we are only on the fringe of the subject yet, but already there have been some remarkable

cures by hypnotism in nervous cases and certain diseases of the mind which have not yielded to other forms of treatment. Not all people are suitable subjects."

"How do you tell if they are?"

Malakoff made a gesture with the hand which held the cigarette, and Fenton's eyes followed the glowing end. "Partly by the use of psychology. An obstinate-minded patient may be gradually brought into a more malleable state with regard to his mind by careful study. Sometimes a person with a strong will may yield to treatment much more quickly than a frail, easily led person. It is paradoxical, but very often true to say that there is no one more obstinate than he who has a weak will."

"I suppose there are certain peculiarities which give

you a clue? "

"Oh, yes. One can usually get a hint by examining a person's eyes," Malakoff replied, and suddenly a fierce beam of light was shining full into Fenton's face. Surreptitiously Professor Malakoff had taken from his

pocket a powerful electric torch.

Fenton, momentarily dazed, tried to close his eyes, but something—was it Malakoff's monotonous voice or his own imagination?—told him that he must keep them open. The white light blinded him, and he became aware of an intense feeling of fear. The deadly monotone droned on. Fenton did not know what was being said, but gradually the voice seemed to soothe him. After a few seconds the light no longer worried him. A peculiar, drifting sensation stole over him, like the sensation one gets when floating on one's back in a gentle sea. Malakoff's voice, always on the same quiet level, made him drowsy. He tried desperately to pull himself together, to return to the control of his own mind and escape from the oblivion into which he was rapidly sinking.

CHAPTER VI

Just a Woman's Intuition

Although he was rapidly falling under Malakoff's influence, Fenton still retained at the moment the ability to think, though slowly and with some confusion, and he realized that he was in very great danger. It was a peculiar sensation. The fierce white light seemed to bore its way into the centre of his brain. The whole room—indeed, so far as he knew in the turmoil of his mind, the whole world—was filled with its brilliance, and from a vast distance came a small insistent voice.

Fenton lay motionless in his chair. The light, which had at first hurt his eyes, no longer produced any feeling of pain, for it seemed to him that he had lost all his senses, so that his body was merely a shell, in which only his brain functioned. Yet even that was becoming subjugated to Malakoff. The Professor's voice, quiet and level at first, gradually increased in volume, although Fenton could not grasp what he was saying.

Frantically, as though in the throes of a nightmare panic, he strove to understand the words, yet all the while a curious subconscious warning told him that danger lay in that direction. He was not yet completely under Malakoff's spell, but he was on the borderline, and once he crossed it there was no telling what dark

and evil paths he would be forced to tread.

For what seemed like hours to his tortured mind he fought with the invisible thing which threatened to overwhelm him. By a series of tremendous efforts he wrested his mind away from that persistent voice. It was not easy. Again and again he found himself listening, striving to catch the murmured words, for it was

Malakoff's soft tones which Fenton found to be most insidious. At times Malakoff's voice was loud, but that was something of a relief to Fenton. It was the subdued, quiet tone which led to danger. Frantically he wrenched his mind away and forced himself to think of something different, and, as if heaven-sent, there came to him in his need the mental vision of Stella.

"Stella! Stella! Stella!" he thought. "I must not listen. I must think of Stella." And all the while the level tones of Malakoff's voice droned on monotonously, and the fierce white light did not deviate an inch from

his wide, staring eyes.

Gradually Fenton found that it became easier to think of Stella so long as he resolutely shut out any wish to hear what Malakoff was saying. At first he found that he was liable to slip back towards that oblivion out of which he had so strenuously fought his way, especially when Malakoff employed that quietly insistent tone; but at length, by concentrating hard upon Stella, he contrived to isolate his mind completely from Malakoff's influence.

Thus he remained lying limply in his chair until quite suddenly he became aware that the light was no longer shining in his eyes, and that Malakoff's voice had ceased. With an effort he pulled himself into a sitting position. The room was quite dark. Malakoff had gone. Fenton groaned and held his head in his hands. He felt completely exhausted, and some time elapsed before he was able to switch on the electric light. As he crossed the floor he staggered like a drunken man, his knees would scarcely bear him up, and he discovered that he was soaked with sweat. His eyes ached intolerably, his head felt as if it had been split open, and when he tried to remember what had happened all he could recollect was that he had been thinking of Stella and that Malakoff might have mentioned the name of Martin Urquhart.

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He sat down, trembling like a man with malaria. "That was a close call," he muttered. "Malakoff put it across me that time. Don't think I'll be left alone with him again. I wonder if he was trying to get information from me or attempting to make me subservient to his will?"

But Fenton was too tired to be able to reason clearly, and after a while he had a bath and went to bed. He slept for twelve hours without waking, and rose considerably refreshed. His experience seemed like an evil dream, and he found that he had only the vaguest idea as to what had happened. As he took his seat at his desk he recollected his conversation with Gustav Kovel only a few days before on the question of why the prisoners in the Russian spy trial were so eager to incriminate themselves.

"Perhaps Gustav is right," he murmured. "After a few interviews of that kind I should say that anyone susceptible to hypnotism would be prepared to swear to anything. I wonder what explanation Malakoff will have to offer for his unusual behaviour."

He rang up the Professor's hotel, but apparently Malakoff did not think an explanation would be either necessary or wise, for he had left by an early train for Warsaw. Fenton was not particularly surprised. He contemplated suggesting to Gustav that the Professor might be met at the capital and apprehended, but he decided that there was nothing to be gained by this procedure. There was no sound evidence which would withstand examination that Malakoff was connected with Urquhart's disappearance, but that hint given by his lie about the brochure on ectoplasm had been amplified. Malakoff was certainly no friend of Fenton's.

"That comes of talking too much," Fenton murmured. "I feel confident that Master Malakoff will turn up again, and if we give him sufficient rope he may

hang himself. But since we believe him to be concerned with Urquhart's absence, so then must Catherine, for she recognized Malakoff on the platform. Query: what is the connecting-link between them?"

He pondered for some time over Catherine's history. Both she and Malakoff were Russian, and in 1926, according to her dossier, she had been seen in the company of Boris Nikoloff, a Russian spy. A year later she was in charge of a club which had been a rendezvous for spies. Did the connecting-link lie somewhere there?

Then Fenton switched his thoughts on to his conversation with Gustav after their dinner at Warsaw. Like most Secret Service men, Fenton never committed anything important to paper if he could possibly avoid it, but he had a retentive memory, and he remembered that Gustav had told him that Urquhart was acquainted with a Russian ex-monk named Kaplov, who dabbled in occult matters. Kaplov had vanished at the same time as Urquhart. Was Kaplov masquerading as Professor Malakoff?

Next Fenton considered the people who were closely connected with Urquhart. Apart from Catherine, there were only two—Wilenski and the stenographer, whose name was Helen Lenk. Fenton wrinkled his nose when he thought of the taciturn Wilenski. He knew his subordinate did not like him and would not be disposed to be helpful. On the other hand, he got on well with Helen.

That afternoon Fenton asked Helen to stay late, making the excuse that he was behind with his correspondence, and when Wilenski had taken his departure with a surly "Good night," he rang for her. She took her accustomed chair, opened her notebook, and looked surprised when Fenton told her to put it away.

"I want to ask you a few questions," he explained.

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Helen said nothing, but watched him speculatively. She was a slim girl, with flaxen hair and blue eyes. Her rather full red lips and rosy cheeks gave the impression that she was unusually healthy for a town-dweller with an indoor occupation. Fenton lit a cigarette and smiled at her, wondering if she was expecting, as a good many stenographers have done, an invitation to dinner or a drive in her employer's car. If so, then she was going to be sadly disappointed.

"You remember Mr Urquhart?" Fenton began. "What was he like in manner?" Seeing her hesitate, he went on, "You can be quite frank with me. This conversation is strictly confidential, and I don't want you to mention it to anyone. You understand? Good. Then

let's have your opinion of Mr Urquhart."

"Well," Helen began slowly, "he was peculiar. He was a very quick worker, and sometimes if I didn't understand things immediately he would be annoyed."

"But you got on all right with him?"

"Oh, yes. He used to get irritable at times, but as often as not he would say he was sorry."

"Do you think his irritation was due to ill-health?"

"That never occurred to me until he was taken ill. I thought it was nerves."

"Was he nervous in the ordinary sense of the word?"

"Yes. He often started at any sudden noise, and he always kept the communicating door locked because he did not like Mr Wilenski coming into the room behind him."

"How did he get on with Mr Wilenski?"

"Not very well. They didn't like each other, and towards the end of Mr Urquhart's time here they hardly spoke."

Fenton nodded and asked, "Do you remember the 15th of March?" 81

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"That was the day before Mr Urquhart left," Helen replied after a pause. "I last saw him at five o'clock."

"How did he behave that day?"

"He was very agitated. He kept on losing his temper and apologizing. He made mistakes too, as if he could not concentrate on his work."

"You remember Miss Borodoshin, who came to see me the other day? Did she visit him on the 15th?"

"No. There were callers, but she was not among them."

"Who were they?"

Helen mentioned as many of them as she could remember, but she was not certain about them after the lapse of time. None of the names conveyed anything to Fenton.

"Cast your mind back to the 16th of March," he said.

"Mr Urquhart did not come to the office at all on that day," Helen remarked.

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure. You see, there was a certain document, rather an urgent one, which required his signature, and when he didn't arrive I was worried."

"What did Mr Wilenski do? Put his own signature

on it?"

"Yes, when he arrived," answered Helen. "But he was late."

"That was unusual from what I know of him," Fenton

suggested.

"Very. He didn't come in till midday. He said he had been seeing Mr Urquhart, who had been taken ill and had left for England."

"You are sure those were the words he used?"

"Yes."

"Did you believe him?"

Helen stared at him with large eyes. "I-well, what

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else could I believe? I was certainly very astonished. Mr Wilenski said something about a nervous breakdown, and certainly that fitted in with Mr Urquhart's previous behaviour. I didn't like to ask questions."

"Any particular reason for not asking?" Fenton queried. "After all, it was a most unusual occurrence."

"Well, Mr Wilenski was in a very bad temper, and

he had a black eye, which hurt him."

Fenton chuckled. "I'll bet it did! Did he explain it?"

"No, but it didn't suit him," smiled Helen.

"And I suppose he took charge of the Consulate and transacted all the official business? H'm. Well, I'm sorry to have kept you so long." Fenton rose, and as Helen stood up he put his hand on her shoulder. "And let me remind you not to repeat any of this conversation to anybody, or even mention that we've had it."

"Indeed, I won't, Mr Fenton," said Helen. "When I leave here I forget all about my work."

"That's a good girl. Good night."

As Helen opened the door she glanced at Fenton and sighed. "I often wish I wasn't," she murmured, and disappeared quickly.

Fenton stared at the closed door. "What the deuce did she mean by that?" he chuckled. "Sounds as if the

wench had ideas."

But he did not waste time thinking about Helen Lenk, for he was much more concerned about his conversation with her. From her description it looked very much as if Martin Urquhart had been expecting something to happen. What was more interesting, however, was that Wilenski had definitely stated to Helen that Urquhart had left for England on the 16th of March, whereas Fenton distinctly remembered Wilenski telling Catherine that he had no idea when Urquhart had left

Wilno. Presumably he had disappeared some time after five o'clock on the afternoon of the 15th. There was also the unusual fact of Wilenski not arriving at the office until midday on the 16th, and then being in possession of a black eye.

Fenton lit another cigarette, took out his monocle, and squinted through it thoughtfully, preparatory to cleaning it. There had always been the possibility that Urquhart had staged his own disappearance, though Fenton had never given the theory much credence. Taking in order of their importance the three people who were in any way connected with Urquhart—that is, Catherine Borodoshin, Professor Malakoff, and Frantisek Wilenski—and remembering their peculiar actions, it seemed that Fenton might dismiss that theory altogether. Wilenski, at the moment, was only under faint suspicion. Possibly his black eye and belated appearance on March the 16th had a perfectly ordinary explanation. Distinguished prelates have been known to kick over the traces; why not the unsociable Wilenski? Catherine and Malakoff were the immediate subjects for investigation, but since the latter had left Wilno Fenton would have to confine his attentions to Catherine.

A smile of pleasurable anticipation appeared on Fenton's face as he took off the telephone receiver and asked for Catherine's number. He felt that, bearing in mind her history and undoubted cleverness, he was probably playing with fire, and that form of amusement had always held a fascination for him. His smile broadened to a wide grin when Catherine expressed her delight at the suggestion that he should visit her that evening.

"Only don't be as late as 11.30, and be sober," she

added mischievously.

"Well, well," mused Fenton as he rang off, "she seems to attract Vice-Consuls as a magnet attracts steel."

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After eating a solitary and thoughtful dinner in his own rooms Fenton walked to Catherine's flat. She admitted him herself, and led the way into her tiny lounge. The first thing that Fenton noticed was that Urquhart's photograph had been restored to its original position on the shelf above the stove. The narrow, ferret-like features seemed to leer mockingly at Fenton, and he turned from them to find Catherine's grave eyes fixed upon him, as if she expected him to make some reference to the missing man. But Fenton considered it more natural to open the conversation with Professor Malakoff.

"I thought him a most interesting and charming old gentleman," said Catherine, offering Fenton an open box

of cigarettes. "Didn't you?"

"I did. So much so that I persuaded him to come back to my rooms for a further talk." Fenton flicked open his lighter, and as Catherine bent over it her eyes moved swiftly over his face. It was an inquiring, calculating glance, but the next instant she was smiling her thanks. "We had a most instructive evening," continued Fenton. "He's an extremely clever man."

"Yes; we must get him here again soon," Catherine said. She took a chair on the opposite side of the stove

to Fenton. "To-morrow, do you think?"

"I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. He left for Warsaw this morning."

"He's gone!" she cried.
"Did you expect it?"

"No. He said nothing about it. I-well, you are right.

I am disappointed."

But the expression which had come into her eyes was not one of disappointment. It was apprehension. The news had been a shock to her, for it had taken her unawares, and on the spur of the moment Fenton decided to follow with an unexpected question, while her mind

was still uneasy, on the chance of her making an unguarded answer.

"Why did you put Martin Urquhart's photograph close by his elbow at tea yesterday?" he demanded.

Once more Catherine's dark eyes regarded him with that calm, challenging expression which he had come to know so well. "So you noticed that?" she said quietly, and Fenton could not help admiring her extraordinary control. Nine people out of ten would have denied the statement, but she, in spite of the shock she had just received, had realized instantly that denial would be useless. "I believed," she continued, "that he would recognize the photograph and comment about it."

"What made you think that?"

"Just a woman's intuition," replied Catherine, glanc-

ing up at the photograph.

"Told off," thought Fenton, who knew that the remark merely meant that she had no intention of answering his question. He leaned forward in his chair and looked at her fixedly. "Not so long ago you suggested that we should be frank with each other," he said.

"I remember, but it didn't get us very far, did it?"

"We had no opportunity, for I was called to Warsaw." Fenton broke off and asked suddenly, "Where had you met Malakoff before?"

"How do you know that I had?" retorted Catherine.

"You recognized him when you saw him at the station."

She smiled and drew slowly at her cigarette. "So you saw that too, did you?"

"I saw you give a start which plainly meant that you

had recognized him."

"There's nothing much escapes you, is there, mon ami? Yes, I'll admit I had seen Malakoff before, though I had not met him, nor did I know his name then. It

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was a long time ago, before I came to Wilno. I was living in Pinsk."

"Lord," thought Fenton, "that's where she was seen with Boris Nikoloff!" Aloud he merely said, "Yes?"

"I saw him first of all in circumstances—which—well—they remained in my memory."

"And why did you connect him with Urquhart?"

She paused some time before replying, but at last she said slowly and in a low voice, "I once heard Martin mention his name." Again she shot that keen, challenging look at Fenton. "Why do you ask me all these questions?" she demanded.

Fenton hesitated. "The first time we met in my office you were interested in Urquhart, weren't you?" Catherine nodded. "Well," Fenton added bluntly, "so am I."

Catherine had no reply to that. She sat silently puffing at her cigarette and staring with an expressionless face at the floor. There was a long silence, but she could play the waiting game as well as Fenton himself, and he knew that if he wished to make any further progress he would have to speak first.

"Just now," he said quietly, "you said that you saw Malakoff first of all in circumstances which remained in your memory. That was at Pinsk, before you came to Wilno. I conclude, therefore, that you have seen him since then."

Catherine nodded. "Yes." She paused, as if choosing her words carefully. "I'd better explain. I contrive to make a small living by contributing articles to papers and magazines on various subjects. One day, a month or more ago, I was getting information on old buildings in Wilno, and I was passing a place with the curious name of the Café of the Thin Heron in Bielsk Street when Professor Malakoff came out. Those two instances, at Pinsk and outside the café, were the only occasions

when I saw him until we came face to face at the station."

"Who owns the Café of the Thin Heron?"

"It is run, I understand, by a Lithuanian named Josef Markevicius, and I don't think it's a very respectable place."

"Did Urquhart ever mention it to you?"

She shook her head.

Catherine's attitude baffled Fenton. He felt that she was concealing something. Yet she made no effort to hide the fact that she had seen Malakoff years ago in Pinsk, where she had moved in company which had caused her to be regarded with deep suspicion. Fenton realized that he was up against an opponent who could

not be taken lightly.

He forbore to ask any more questions, but the friendly atmosphere which had been so obvious when he arrived had been destroyed. Catherine sat silently smoking cigarette after cigarette, and Fenton's attempts at casual conversation met with little response. At length he rose to go. She said good-night to him almost sadly, and held his hand longer than was necessary, as if she was loath to let him depart. Fenton was puzzled, and went off down the road in a curiously perturbed frame of mind.

Presently, however, he squared his shoulders and took a more rosy view of things. He had found the link between Catherine and Malakoff, though it was not particularly creditable to the former. Malakoff had been

seen emerging from the Café of the Thin Heron.

"I think," Fenton murmured to himself, "I will pay a visit to this haunt of the emaciated fish-eater." He glanced at his watch, and saw that the time was only half-past nine. "'Do not put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day,'" he quoted, and then grinned cheerfully, for it had occurred to him that Catherine might have

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skilfully baited a trap. Even now she might be warning

the Café by telephone to expect him.

"Possibly," chuckled Fenton, "they might be preparing a warm reception for me, wherefore I shall not appear as His Britannic Majesty's Vice-Consul, but as somebody quite inconspicuous—say, Cardinal Wolsey or the President of the Home of Rest for Destitute Budgerigars."

CHAPTER VII

The Points of the Triangle Had Been Linked Together

 ${f T}_{
m HE}$ Café of the Thin Heron was situated in one of the older and poorer parts of Wilno, where the streets are narrow and cobbled, and the houses, though doubtless ancient and picturesque, seem on the verge of falling into ruin. The Café itself looked far from prosperous. The glass entrance-door, flanked by two ordinary shop-windows, was cracked, and in one corner a piece of cardboard had been fixed to cover a large hole. The windows had not been cleaned for some considerable time. There were fly-stains dotted liberally about them, and across the lower half of each was dragged a torn and dingy strip of curtain, so that customers inside could just see over the top, while the curious who passed along the pavements could see nothing of what was taking place inside. Above the windows was a strip of woodwork from which most of the paint had peeled, although close observation revealed that the name of the Café and an execrable attempt to portray a heron had once gleamed there in lines and curves of gold.

The promise of the façade was amply fulfilled by the interior, which was no more than a small oblong room with a low and sadly discoloured ceiling. The distemper, once an unhealthy and bilious green, had faded and peeled from the walls in large patches, and, indeed, in more than one place the plaster itself had disintegrated. A dozen small tables were set about the room, and at the end farthest from the entrance four tables were set in alcoves hung with soiled red cur-

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tains, so that the occupants could protect themselves from the gaze of the inquisitive. It was a poor person's hostelry, and Fenton, who had looked up the place on a street map, had deduced as much from the district in which the Café was situated.

The only people to take any notice of him as he entered were three women. They eyed him calculatingly, and Fenton, quite aware of their occupation and interest, chose a table as far away as possible. He slumped heavily down into a chair, and when a thin-faced, tired-looking waiter arrived gruffly ordered some beer.

Fenton had altered a good deal from the spruce young man who had visited Catherine Borodoshin. His lounge suit and highly polished shoes had been replaced by thick boots and an oily dark blue boiler-suit which he used occasionally when he made adjustments to his car. A knotted scarf had taken the place of his spotless collar and tie, the monocle had vanished, and a heavy fair moustache adorned his upper lip. A chauffeur's cap was pulled at an angle over his eyes. Fenton, however, knew that alteration in clothes and features alone is not sufficient to disguise a person: it is the ability to live the character of which the clothes are only the outward visible sign.

His hands were greasy, his finger-nails thick with dirt. He drank a draught of beer, forced a yawn, and wiped his hand over his face, leaving a grimy streak. To the world in general he was just a mechanic who had been working overtime and had come wearily to the Café for a final drink before going to bed. He yawned again, propped his elbows on the table, and sank his face into his hands. But he did not close his eyes. Instead he subjected the Café and its occupants to a close scrutiny between his fingers.

At the far end of the room four men, workmen

judging by their dress, were engrossed in a game of dominoes. At another table a man and a woman, probably husband and wife, thought Fenton, sat almost in silence. A bearded individual read a tattered newspaper, sipping now and then from a glass at his elbow. Behind a counter, which cut off one corner of the room, stood a stoutish man of middle age. He had a round, florid face, his hair had receded from his forehead, and his protuberant eyes seemed likely to fall out of his head as he methodically counted the money in the till. The waiter was occupied in washing glasses.

The only one of the Café's occupants whom Fenton could place with any certainty was the stout man behind the counter. He was, or should be, the proprietor, Josef Markevicius. So far the Café appeared to be a perfectly ordinary and orderly place, and the

best thing Fenton could do was to wait.

He sighed and drank some more beer. Waiting for something to turn up and trying to fit together the jigsaw puzzle of Urquhart's disappearance when most of the pieces were missing seemed to be his lot nowadays. His active spirit much preferred something more dashing, but his experience had taught him long ago that much of the work of the Secret Service is appallingly dull, and that a good deal of it consists of the correct correlation of apparently unrelated items of information. There is far more actual Secret Service work done in certain obscure offices than in gaudy hotels between polished diplomats, or in the salons of beautiful ladies whose tempting charms cause ambassadors to become so delirious with frustrated passion that they obligingly betray the plans of their country's latest aeroplane, which in any case it is unlikely they would possess. Fenton sighed again. A little trifling with a beautiful lady would be preferable to remaining in this uninteresting place.

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Silence descended upon the Café, a silence broken only by the occasional rustle made by the newspaper-reader and the regular tap, tap as the domino-players placed their pieces on the table. Fenton continued to wait in patience, pretending that he had drifted into a doze. The proprietor had finished counting his money—"which ought not to take him long," thought Fenton, "if to-night is an example of the trade he does"—and was now sitting morosely behind the bar. His assistant was pleasantly engaged in cleaning his finger-nails with one of the establishment's spare forks.

Half an hour passed before the glass door swung open. Then up the centre of the room strode a short, broad-shouldered man, better dressed than any of the other customers. Fenton, peering between his fingers, muttered, "Holy smoke!" beneath his breath. He knew that walk and that figure. It did not need the confirmation of the horn-rimmed spectacles as the newcomer turned towards the counter to tell him that this was Frantisek Wilenski.

It seemed that this was by no means the first time the Pole had visited the place, for at a nod from Markevicius Wilenski pushed open a door near the corner of the bar and vanished into the back premises. After a moment Markevicius followed him.

Fenton remembered that Catherine Borodoshin had told him she had seen Malakoff coming out of the Café. Malakoff was in some way connected with Martin Urquhart. Now Wilenski had come to the Café, in fact, seemed quite at home there, and Helen Lenk had said that the day after Urquhart had gone sick Wilenski had arrived at the office with a black eye. Taking these items of information together, it was not unreasonable to suppose that Wilenski was also concerned with the disappearance of his superior.

"So the little lay reader's in it too," muttered Fenton, for Wilenski, with his precise and earnest manner, always reminded him of those useful workers in the cause of religion. He eyed the distant door speculatively. "What does A do next, as they say in the

etiquette problems?"

Before he could make up his mind the four dominoplayers finished their game and rose. One left the Café, but the remaining three passed through the door which Wilenski had used. Fenton finished his beer thoughtfully. He would dearly like to know what was going on behind that door, but he felt reasonably sure that he would be stopped if he attempted to use it. Two more customers came in, habitués too, for the sad-faced waiter brought their drinks without waiting for any orders, and stopped for a moment to talk. This gave Fenton a chance he was quick to seize. While the waiter's back was turned he strode quickly up the room and pushed open the door. Fortunately it was not locked, but as it swung shut behind him he heard a startled cry from the waiter.

Fenton found himself in a narrow, dark passage, at the far end of which a lamp was burning. He moved forward, but he had scarcely gone three yards when the door behind him was wrenched open and the waiter's startled voice said, "Here, where are you going? That's

private. You can't go there."

Fenton muttered something about a lavatory and pressed on.

"Come back!" called the waiter.

His voice must have raised the alarm, for there was a sudden rush of feet down carpetless stairs, and the large bulk of Josef Markevicius loomed up in the lamplight, completely blocking the passage.

"What do you want?" he demanded sourly. "Don't

you know this part of the house is private?"

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Again Fenton muttered his excuse.

"Go outside and turn to the left," said Markevicius,

and there was nothing Fenton could do but obey.

Markevicius was certainly right. A passage did lead to a lavatory, and that was all. High blank walls surrounded it on the remaining three sides. Fenton came out and walked past the Café. The streets in this part of the city were badly lit, and because of their narrowness the darkness was intense.

Having been frustrated once in his attempt to follow Wilenski, Fenton was all the more determined to find out what was going on at the back of the Café. Fifty yards past the building he came upon a lane. He turned down this and emerged into a road which ran roughly parallel to the one in which the Café stood. He walked along until he judged he was opposite the back of the building, and here he had a stroke of luck. On the far side of a low wall was a mason's yard. Beyond that, unless his sense of direction was at fault, must lie the Café.

He glanced round. The road was deserted, and no lights showed in the houses near at hand. Without any difficulty he crossed the low wall and picked his way carefully round the heaps of stone. The yard was bounded by a high wall. A little exploration led him to an oblong slab of stone from the top of which he could reach the summit of the wall. With a heave and a spring he was there, lying on his face, so that the smallest possible outline would show against the sky, and examining the ground below. Looking up for a moment, he saw on the farther side of a yard littered with cases and bottles an illuminated window, and for an instant the figure of Josef Markevicius appeared in the room beyond.

He slid off the wall and, hanging at the full length of his arms, dropped on to the side of an upturned

case. The bottles inside rattled ominously, and Fenton crouched down in the darkness, lest the noise should have alarmed anyone. But the silence settled down again, and presently he began to creep towards the back of the Café building. From the ground he could get a view only of the ceiling of the room in which he had seen Markevicius, but to his joy he saw that the roof of an outhouse of the lean-to type sloped up to a point just below the window.

A little prospecting in the darkness produced some empty cases—those containing bottles rattled too much—by means of which he climbed on to the roof, and from the shelter of a convenient chimney-stack he was

able to see clearly into the room.

Markevicius, carrying a tray with some bottles of wine, crossed the window and put his burden down on a table in the centre of the room. Wilenski and one of the domino-players moved into view, and then, just as Fenton was congratulating himself on his good fortune, the latter came forward and dragged a pair of

ragged curtains across the glass.

"Confound!" muttered Fenton, who had dodged back into the shelter of the chimney-stack. Almost it seemed as though his trouble had been in vain, until he realized that by creeping up to the window and peering through one of the holes in the curtain he would be able to see into the room. It would, of course, mean that anyone looking from the houses behind him would very likely see his head and shoulders silhouetted against the light, but that risk would have to be taken. After a careful glance round he crept quietly up the sloping roof towards the window.

The roof joined the outer wall of the house some two feet below the sill, and by kneeling Fenton was able to press his face close to the glass and peep through a convenient hole. Thus he obtained a restricted view

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of the room, but fortunately those within were grouped closely round the table in the centre. Wilenski, Markevicius, and the three domino-players were talking gravely with their heads close together, and all of them except Wilenski had been supplied with wine.

It was the first time he had been able to get a good look at the men who had been playing dominoes, for two of them had had their backs to him in the Café, while the third had sat with a bowed head and his hat pulled over his eyes. Now, however, at short range the face of one of them seemed familiar. Fenton could not quite place him until he removed his hat and disclosed a bald head. Then in a flash Fenton recollected that he was the man who had tried so hard to listen to the conversation between himself and Catherine in the lounge of the restaurant.

"So this is where you belong, is it?" Fenton murmured. "First Wilenski, then you. The plot thickens.

In fact, it has thuck."

Presently another of the domino-players, a fellow with a heavy black moustache and beetling eyebrows, produced from a pocket-book what looked to Fenton like a map. The others studied it for some time, apparently discussing various items from the ways in which they pointed with their fingers, until finally it was passed to Wilenski. After a perfunctory glance the latter placed it between two sheets of paper, carefully gummed down the edges, and put the whole lot into his wallet. Then, after replenishing their glasses, the men drew close together in animated discussion.

The minutes passed slowly, and still the men inside the room kept up an incessant conversation. And then suddenly, like so many puppets actuated by strings, their heads jerked round, as if they were looking at something on one side of the room. That something was outside Fenton's field of vision, but he guessed that

somebody had come in by the door. In any case the effect was remarkable. The men sprang to their feet, and while the rest rushed out of the room one made straight for the window.

Fenton just had time to duck down before the curtain was wrenched aside and the sash flung up. The man leaned out, peering into the darkness, while Fenton crouched below the sill within a foot of him. Now it is not possible for anyone coming directly from a lighted room to see into darkness with any success until the eyes have adjusted themselves to the altered conditions. That is undoubtedly what saved Fenton from discovery. The man did not wait until his eyes had become accustomed to the dark, but with a savage oath he withdrew his head and slammed down the window with a violence that nearly shattered the glass.

Now was Fenton's chance, and he took it. The person who had entered the room must have warned Wilenski and his friends that somebody was unofficially present at their conference. Fenton had no wish to be the chief figure at an investigation which would certainly be very unpleasant. He ran lightly down the roof and dropped to the ground. At the same instant a door at the back of the Café building was flung open, and a stream of yellow light shot out into the yard. There was a gabble of voices, and a number of men appeared in the doorway a few yards from Fenton.

They could not see him, because he was hidden by the projecting outhouse, but he realized that discovery was only a matter of seconds, and the one way of escape known to him was by the route he had come. That involved crossing the yard and scaling the wall, when he would be at the mercy of his pursuers. Somehow he must create a diversion. It was a time for quick thinking and quick action. By his side was a case of empty bottles. He grabbed one by the neck and threw

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it through the window of the room where the meeting had been held.

The crash of glass startled the men in the doorway. They stopped suddenly and peered upward. Then, leaving one of their number on the threshold, the remainder rushed back into the house. Obviously they thought the intruder had entered the room by breaking the window. Fenton withdrew another bottle and, taking careful aim, hurled it at the fellow guarding the door. At that range he could scarcely miss. The bottle took the man full in the face. With a cry of mingled surprise and pain he staggered back, caught his heel on the doorstep, and fell into the passage-way.

Fenton dashed towards the case which had facilitated his descent from the wall, jumped on it, and with a leap worthy of a gymnast reached the top of the wall. At the same instant two pistol-shots rang out in quick succession, probably from the gentleman in the passage, who had now regained his feet. The first smacked into the wall wide on Fenton's left; the second whistled harmlessly over his head. He did not wait for the third, but, dropping to the full length of his arms on the far

side of the wall, he let go.

As he turned to run a shadowy figure came towards him. He could see the pale oval of a face in the darkness, and he sprang forward with all his weight behind his left fist. His knuckles connected with the man's teeth, and he crashed over backward. As he vaulted the low wall into the road Fenton heard a woman scream, and he took to his heels and fled. Up this turning and down that he ran, blessing the poor illumination of the streets and the fact that there did not seem to be any pursuit. As a matter of fact, his last assailant had cracked his head on a piece of masonry in falling and had been rendered unconscious.

Presently Fenton dropped to a walk, having a fair

idea of the direction which would take him back to the Consulate. He had enjoyed the little fracas exceedingly, and it had cost him only three split knuckles on his left hand. That was a cheap price for learning that Wilenski was up to some monkey trick. It was a pity that he had been unable to hear the conversation or to see the paper which Wilenski had so carefully secreted. A sudden thought occurred to Fenton, and at a chemist's shop, the sort of place where good money is taken and no questions asked, he bought a small bottle of butyl-chloride.

Then he continued his journey home, well pleased with his evening's work, which had been partly spoiled by some interfering person who had probably seen him crouching at the window and had given the alarm.

But before he reached the Consulate he received an unpleasant shock. Turning from a side-street into one of the better-lit and more populous thoroughfares, he was amazed to see a familiar figure striding along a few yards ahead of him. Fenton slackened his pace. What was Catherine Borodoshin doing abroad at this hour, for by now it was half-past eleven, and he had left her, so he imagined, comfortably settled for the evening.

When he eventually reached the Consulate he got out the street map of Wilno. He knew the street in which he had seen Catherine, and a few seconds showed him that it was on the direct route from the Café of the Thin Heron to her flat. A hard look came into his eyes,

and swift thoughts flashed through his brain.

Catherine had told him about the Café. After he had left her she might have suspected that he would be interested enough to pay a visit that night. A telephone-call to his rooms would establish the fact that he was out, and since so far as he could remember the Café was not on the telephone, and it was unlikely in view of the poverty of the place, Catherine, if she wished to

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warn them, would have been forced to go in person. And since some one had given the alarm, an alarm which in view of the pistol-shots might have cost Fenton his life, and Fenton had seen Catherine returning from the direction of the Café, the inference was plain.

Catherine, Malakoff, Wilenski. The points of the triangle had been linked together. And the next move?

Fenton grinned quietly to himself as he bathed his split knuckles before going to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

I Thought You Ought To Be Acquainted With the Facts

The following day Lawrence Fenton appeared in his office with his knuckles decorated with a strip of adhesive plaster, but he was careful to keep his hand in his pocket on the few occasions when Wilenski came into the room. Fenton badly desired to get a glimpse of the documents which his subordinate had carefully hidden between the two sheets of gummed paper, but he had no certain method of so doing. A sketchy plan had entered his head the previous night as he made his way home, but so much risk was attached to it that he debated for a long while whether to make the attempt. However, by the time Helen Lenk began to prepare afternoon tea he had decided that in view of the probable importance of the paper the risk was worth taking.

When Helen appeared with the tray bearing two cups of tea, one of which was for Wilenski, and the usual plate of biscuits Fenton remarked casually, "By the way, Helen, you might fetch me those papers concerning that Wisbetski affair, will you? I'm not sure that fellow has

got his figures right."
"Yes, Mr Fenton."

"Now, please," said Fenton quickly, as the girl appeared undecided whether to do the errand before she took in Wilenski's tea or afterwards.

Helen put the tray down on the edge of Fenton's desk and went to her own room. She had scarcely passed through the doorway when Fenton whipped a small bottle out of his waistcoat pocket, extracted the cork, and poured a few drops of liquid into Wilenski's tea. By the time Helen returned he was ostensibly making notes You Ought To Be Acquainted With the Facts on a sheet of paper and stirring his tea thoughtfully.

Helen took Wilenski's cup and departed.

Fenton waited five minutes before he opened the communicating door. Wilenski was sitting at his desk, his head resting on the blotting-pad and his arms hanging limply at his sides. The cup of tea was two-thirds full. Fenton crossed the floor and shook his sub-ordinate, but Frantisek Wilenski was completely out. The drops of butyl-chloride were as potent as the fist of a heavyweight champion.

"If Helen walks in things will be awkward," muttered Fenton. Swiftly he fetched his own cup of tea, drank a third of it, put it on Wilenski's desk, and studied both cups carefully. The addition of a little tea to his own saucer, for Helen had spilled some of Wilenski's, made them identical in appearance. He transferred Wilenski's cup to his own desk and returned through the communicating door, which he left ajar, so that he could hear if

anyone entered his room.

Świftly he began to search Wilenski's pockets in quest of that piece of gummed notepaper, and he was considerably disappointed when he failed to find it in the man's wallet. A more careful examination, however, revealed a hidden pocket cunningly contrived behind the inside pocket of Wilenski's coat. Fenton thrust in his hand, and his fingers closed on paper. He drew out the article. It was two sheets of thick paper gummed together at the edges.

Propping the unconscious Wilenski securely in his chair, Fenton returned to his own room and borrowed a jug of hot water from Helen. By this means he was able to steam open one edge of the packet, and from the interior dropped two thin strips of paper. Fenton, with the aid of a ruler, for he had no intention of leaving his finger-prints on the slips, turned them over, and, as

he had expected, found them to be maps.

The first map depicted the north-eastern arm of Poland, where it runs up towards Latvia and is bounded on one side by Russia and on the other by Lithuania. A fair amount of detail was shown, such as rivers and lakes, and it did not seem different from any of the maps of the district which were in the Consulate. Fenton, who had pulled on gloves, studied it carefully, held it up to the light, reversed it, held it level with his eyes, and squinted along its surface, but despite this treatment it remained, much to his disappointment, a perfectly ordinary map. The information it offered was obvious enough, but Fenton felt sure that Wilenski would not take such delicate care of it, nor conceal it so thoroughly, if there were no more in it than that. For the moment. however, he was beaten, and he turned his attention to the second map.

This depicted Central Europe so obviously that he stared at it in blank amazement. As with the first map, there was not a dot or mark of any kind. Not a pinprick, not a single letter underlined, not a hint of any of the many tricks which so often have been used to convey secret information.

Fenton pulled a wry face. His luck had held when he had found the package, for it had been highly probable that Wilenski would not have carried it about with him, but the good fortune had certainly deserted him now. There was absolutely nothing to be learned from either map. For what it was worth Fenton took a quick tracing of each, using his pencil lightly to avoid leaving any impress on the original, and then restored them to their hiding-place between the sheets of notepaper, which in turn he replaced in Wilenski's secret pocket. Having closed the communicating door, he emptied the doctored tea into a vase of flowers and sat down at his desk again. His little plot had not produced the results for which he had hoped. He put the tracings of the two maps into

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his pocket-book and sat puzzling his brain over what

they might mean.

Five minutes later Helen entered to clear away the tea-things. As she approached the communicating door Fenton waited expectantly. A moment later he heard a stifled cry, and the girl rushed back into his room.

"Oh, Mr Fenton! Mr Wilenski is ill! I think he's

fainted!"

With an exclamation of surprise Fenton left his desk. Wilenski sat just as he had left him, slumped over his desk. Fenton shook him.

"Fetch some water, Helen."

By the time the girl had returned Wilenski had opened his eyes and was staring dazedly before him. Fenton encouraged him to sip the water, and then, moistening a handkerchief, bathed his forehead.

"What's the matter, old chap?" he asked sympathetically, while Helen took one of his hands and began

patting it.

Wilenski blinked his eyes behind his thick glasses. "I—I don't know. I can't remember," he murmured.

Presently, however, he had recovered sufficiently to stand up, albeit rather shakily.

"Did you find me?" he asked Fenton.

"No, Helen did. She came to clear away your tea."

"Oh!" Wilenski looked at the cup on his desk. It was obvious that he had drunk some, but he made no comment on the fact. "I suppose I must have fainted."

"But do you feel ill? Why should you?" Fenton asked in feigned surprise, taking care to keep his damaged knuckles out of sight now that his subordinate was able to take an intelligent interest in things.

"No. I don't understand it. I feel better now." He

put out a hand to steady himself.

"Perhaps you lunched too well, old man," chuckled Fenton.

"Are you suggesting I was drunk?" Wilenski de-

manded indignantly.

"Oh, no, my dear chap, nothing of the kind. I know you don't drink. But a good lunch is quite likely to upset one. Still, there's no harm done. Toddle off home as soon as you like. Shall I drive you?"

"No, thank you," Wilenski replied stiffly. "I can

manage."

Fenton sauntered back to his own room, and as he passed through the doorway he heard Wilenski say sharply to Helen, "No, leave that." Out of the corner of his eye he saw the stenographer replace the cup and saucer on the desk. He smiled to himself, for he guessed, and quite correctly, that Wilenski intended to have his tea analysed.

"Suspicious little blighter!" he murmured. "I am

afraid he'll be disappointed."

And Wilenski was. Indeed, since the tea proved to be quite harmless he was completely at a loss to account for his sudden loss of consciousness. Mere fainting was out of the question—there were certain after-effects which made that theory untenable—and finally he was forced to the unsatisfactory conclusion that the cause must have been something he had eaten at lunch, which explanation Fenton had been careful to suggest.

But if Wilenski was puzzled, so was Fenton. In fact, he was at a loss to know what to do next. The Café of the Thin Heron was sure to be carefully watched, and it would be taking a profitless risk to venture there. Doubtless Josef Markevicius would remember the man who had tried to reach the back premises through the private door, and all strangers would be subjected to a rigorous scrutiny. Wilenski was probably as full of suspicion as a porcupine is of quills, and it would be wiser to leave him alone. There remained Catherine Borodoshin. Fenton wondered if, when she had warned Marke-

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vicius, as he was now certain she had done, she had mentioned his name. If she had, then Wilenski must know that his superior was behaving in a manner unusual for a Vice-Consul.

Several days passed. Fenton had telephoned Catherine twice, but on each occasion her maid had told him that she was out. He had spent most of his evenings worrying away at the tracings of the two maps, without any result, and in writing out the details of the case, carefully burning the papers afterwards. He rang up Gustav Kovel, only to be told that he was on leave. Altogether the affaire Urquhart seemed to have arrived at the doldrums.

But even the doldrums must come to an end, and the sudden squall which smote Fenton just when his restlessness was growing insupportable not only blew the cobwebs out of his mind, but very nearly capsized him. The squall arrived in the person of Wilenski, who presented himself in Fenton's office one afternoon and asked permission to speak upon a very important matter; and when Fenton bade him get it off his chest, a vulgarism which, if his facial expression was any criterion, caused as much pain to Wilenski as drawing a tooth would have done, he stepped to the door which led to Helen Lenk's room to make certain that it was securely shut. Fenton, perplexed by this display of caution, waited patiently.

Wilenski took his stand opposite his superior and cleared his throat. "I trust that what I have to say will not be displeasing to you," he began, a trifle pompously. "To me it appears to be a matter of supreme importance, and I believe you will agree. You may remember that some eighteen years ago Poland extended her frontier into what was then Lithuania, and that there has been great bitterness of feeling between Poles and Lithuanians ever since. Wilno, indeed, is still regarded by the latter as their true capital, and Kaunas only a makeshift. It was

only quite recently that the Polish-Lithuanian frontier was opened, and that was only a mere formality. There is still considerable antagonism between the two peoples."

Fenton, surprised at the subject of Wilenski's speech, wondered what he was getting at, and wished he would hurry on to the point. Wilenski, his trousers stretched tightly over round thighs, his spectacles like twin searchlights directed immovably at his superior, possibly sensed the latter's impatience, for he said, "I have recalled history because it has considerable bearing on what I have to tell you. From information which has reached me I have reason to believe that a party of Lithuanian patriots, who have remained in Wilno ever since the town was annexed by Poland, is deeply concerned in a plot for the restoration of its former territory to their own country."

"Good Lord!" Fenton ejaculated, though the news was no great surprise to him. He knew that there existed from time to time all sorts of fire-breathing societies sworn to right the wrongs of Lithuania. "Well," he

added, "it's nothing to do with us."

"I thought you ought to be acquainted with the facts,"

said Wilenski.

"They are interesting, certainly, but you must realize that such a plot, even if it exists, can't possibly concern Great Britain. Unlike some other nations, we do not meddle with the private affairs of friendly countries. I must warn you very seriously not to become involved with subversive politics of any kind so long as you are in the employ of the Consular Service. I know you will realize that in the event of any trouble occurring through this plot it would not look at all well for this office to be embroiled even through a solitary member of its staff. The best advice I can offer is that you forget the matter immediately."

To be strictly accurate, Fenton was itching to know 108

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more, but he realized that his official position must come before everything in the presence of his subordinate.

"I quite agree, sir," replied Wilenski stolidly, "and it rather goes against the grain for a patriotic Pole to have his hands so tied, but there is another aspect I have not mentioned. It concerns Mr Urquhart."

Fenton looked sharply at him. "In what way?"

"I understand that Mr Urquhart was involved in the plot," was the amazing reply. "I believe," Wilenski continued hurriedly, as if he wanted to get out all he knew before Fenton could stop him, "I believe he was led into it through the influence of Miss Borodoshin, and I hope you won't take offence, sir, but I considered it my duty to acquaint you with this fact because it has seemed to me that lately Miss Borodoshin has been de-

voting a good deal of time to you."

"Well, I'll be-" Fenton broke off and stared at Wilenski, but the Pole's face was as expressionless as a slab of concrete. For the moment he could not understand what Wilenski hoped to gain by this rather guarded revelation. Was the next move an invitation for Fenton to attend a meeting of the Lithuanian patriots, to be followed by a knife between the shoulder-blades? That would mean Wilenski knew of his investigations into the disappearance of Urquhart and wished to curtail them permanently. That was a reasonable and probable explanation, for Catherine must have guessed and Malakoff knew, and Fenton had linked all three of them together. On the other hand, Wilenski might be a patriotic Pole doing a little investigation on his own account by pretending to be a traitor for the purpose of working with the Lithuanians. Fenton recollected that Gustav Kovel and Lord Braxted had inquired about Wilenski. He also remembered that Kovel had said that Urquhart was poking his ferret nose into political affairs which were no concern of his at all.

These thoughts and many others flashed like lightning through Fenton's mind, but the thing which stood out most prominently was the chance he now had of testing both the knowledge and good faith of Wilenski.

"So you think Mr Urquhart is not on sick leave?" he asked.

A faint twitching of the lips, which was the best Wilenski could do in the way of a smile, greeted the question. "That," said Wilenski, "is a polite fiction which has had to be maintained for the benefit of the public, for obvious reasons."

"You suggest that he got into the bad books of these

Lithuanian plotters, and they disposed of him?"

Wilenski nodded.

" How?"

"I don't know."

Fenton grunted. He had not expected that Wilenski would answer that question. "Who are these Lithuanian patriots?" he demanded. "Who is their leader? Where

can they be found?"

"I understand that their leader, at least in Wilno, is a man named Josef Markevicius," Wilenski replied, with a promptitude which astonished Fenton. "He is the proprietor of the Café of the Thin Heron, which is the headquarters of the party in the city."

"Anything else?"

"No, sir. I am afraid that is all the information I have at the moment."

"No idea what these men are plotting or when their

plan is likely to take effect?"

Wilenski shook his head. "It is not easy to learn things like that. What I really wished to do was to warn you, so that you might not—er—so that——"

"I might not follow in the footsteps of Mr Urquhart?"

Fenton suggested.

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"Exactly, sir. I hope you will forgive any liberties I

may have taken."

"That's quite all right. It was good of you to bring the matter to my notice, but I can only repeat that it is no concern of ours. Keep out of it, you understand?"

When Wilenski had returned to his own room Fenton sat for some time thinking deeply. The Pole had been extraordinarily frank, but what had he hoped to gain? He had not told Fenton anything which the latter did not know already.

But a squall is seldom a solitary affair. More often than not it is followed by another, and such proved to be the case in this instance. On the evening of the day when Wilenski had made his disclosures Fenton was in his rooms trying to concentrate on a letter to Stella when the telephone-bell rang shrilly. With a muttered imprecation he picked up the receiver.

"Yes, this is Fenton speaking."

The next instant he stiffened in his chair, for Catherine's imploring voice came over the wire.

"Oh, Lawrie, will you come round at once? Something

has happened. I must see you. I need your help."

"What's the trouble, Catherine?" But as he spoke a

host of suspicions entered his mind.

"I've heard from Martin." The words were gasped out as if Catherine was in great agony of mind. "Please come. I need your help dreadfully."

"I'll come at once," said Fenton quickly.

He replaced the receiver, and sat for a moment staring at the instrument with a faint smile on his face. "I wonder," he murmured. "It would make a very pleasant little trap. First of all Wilenski throws in the ground bait, and then Catherine offers a nice tempting morsel which conceals a nasty hook. However, fish sometimes take the bait without touching the hook. We'll just trot along and see what this poor fish can do."

CHAPTER IX

Do You Wonder I Suspect You?

CATHERINE opened the door of the flat, a Catherine with wide eyes and an anxious and distraught appearance. Her calm serenity had vanished. She was nervous and on edge, and the voice in which she bade Fenton enter was almost stifled in her throat. She led the way into the tiny lounge, Fenton following with ears and eyes alert.

"Thank God you have come, Lawrie!" she cried, putting an agitated hand upon his shoulder. "I need

your advice. I-I have heard from Martin!"

"From Urquhart?" Fenton exclaimed, for until that moment he had not really believed her words. "How? When? Tell me."

She motioned him to the settee, and mechanically held out a box of cigarettes. Fenton sat down so that he could watch the door, for Catherine's astonishing announcement had not banished his wariness. Only the two of them were in the room, but the rest of the flat might conceal a dozen men.

Catherine sank into a chair opposite him. "It happened this evening just before I telephoned you. I was sitting here writing, and the telephone rang. When I picked up the receiver I heard a man's voice which I did not recognize, because it was so weak and hoarse, until he used a pet name by which he used to call me."

Catherine spoke with difficulty. She was obviously under a great stress of emotion.

"What did he say?" asked Fenton.

"He sort of gasped out 'Reenie! That is you? Tell-successor-watch-Thin-Heron!' Then he broke off with

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a dreadful cry of 'Malakoff!' and what sounded like a scream of fear." Catherine paused and passed her hand across her eyes. "It seemed, Lawrie, as if Malakoff had discovered him at the telephone and had either dragged him away or—or struck him down. That was all. Afterwards there was just—silence. Oh, Lawrie, suppose they have killed him!"

Fenton shook his head. "It is not likely. If they wanted to do that they would have done it before. No, that message is good news, for it shows that Urquhart

is still alive."

"But where? Where? How can we help him?"

Fenton pondered. What lay behind this message? Had it actually been received? Or had Catherine invented it for some purpose of which he knew nothing? He had watched her carefully, and unless the woman was an actress comparable with Sarah Bernhardt herself he would have sworn that her emotion was genuine.

"That is what we must find out," he answered.

"But how? We are so helpless, like people groping in a fog." She threw out her hands in a pleading gesture. "Lawrie, Lawrie, what can we do? I feel so desperate, so much without hope. It is too awful to think that he went from this flat and was never seen again."

Fenton seized on the chance of gaining a little more information. "Tell me," he said quickly, "how he

behaved when he was last with you."

Catherine hesitated, her fingers twining and intertwining restlessly, as if she could not decide what to

say.

"Come along," Fenton urged. "It would be better if you would, no matter how fanciful you make your suggestions. God knows, there seems nothing else to go upon!"

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Suddenly he sat up, for his keen ear had caught the

slight click of the front-door latch.

"It is only my maid returning," Catherine said dully. She took a cigarette from the box, but so preoccupied was she that for several seconds she did not see the lighter which Fenton offered.

"Well?" he asked, still listening for any suspicious

noise from the other side of the door.

"All right," she said. "I will tell you. He was different that night. He was on edge, nervous, anxious. In the midst of our talk he would pause. Sometimes he would seem lost in thought, and sometimes he would be listening. There was, I know, a pistol in his pocket, for I felt the hard bulge of it. But to me he was very tender and very kind, more so than I had ever known him. A woman notices these things, and I asked him to tell me his trouble, but he would not. He merely laughed and caressed me, and said it was not women's work. I thought afterwards that he realized that he was going out to face some terrible danger, guessed, perhaps, that he might not return."

"And then after a time he went?" asked Fenton, realizing that Catherine's description tallied fairly well

with that given by Helen Lenk.

Catherine nodded, staring at the floor. She was calmer now, and had regained control of herself. "Yes, he kissed me, making light of his troubles, though he did not deceive me, and I let him out of the front door. As he reached the bottom of the stairs he turned and threw me a kiss. That was the last I saw of him."

Fenton took a sidelong glance at the photograph on the shelf. It was difficult to imagine the foxy-faced Urquhart in the *rôle* of Romeo; difficult, too, to understand what attraction he could have for a woman like Catherine.

"There is one other thing," Catherine added slowly.

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"Afterwards I found between the cushions of the settee a slip of paper. Whether he left it there by accident or design I cannot say."

"You have it still?"

She nodded and, going to a small writing-table, unlocked a drawer. "I do not understand what the inscription means," she said, handing him a narrow

slip of thin, cheap paper.

One side of the slip was almost covered with writing in the Lithuanian language, of which Fenton recognized a word or two. On the other side was, apparently, a pencilled translation in English. He adjusted his monocle, bent over the blurred words, and read aloud slowly:

"The Herons fly north of still blue water; they follow the path of laughing water, and are greeted by its merriment again as they fly north. At last they rest in the heronry where three lands meet, with the moon on one hand, a pig on the other—and still there is quiet blue water."

Twice he went through the curious wording, while

Catherine watched him anxiously.

"God knows the meaning of this jargon!" he said at length. "At a rough guess I should say that it is a secret instruction for somebody to follow a certain route. Whether it was intended for Urquhart's use we cannot tell."

"If we could interpret the meaning I wonder if it would lead us to Martin?" said Catherine almost

eagerly.

"I don't know. The first thing is to find the meaning, and that may take weeks, for we have no clue." Actually it had occurred to Fenton that the two tracings which were securely hidden in his rooms might prove of some value, but he thought it wiser to say nothing about them to Catherine.



"May I keep this, or shall I make a copy?"

"Would you mind, Lawrie? You see, it's the only thing Martin left behind." She turned away to fetch

paper and ink.

Fenton made a careful copy, which he placed in his wallet. For a few minutes there was silence. Catherine was standing by the stove, staring at the photograph of Urquhart, on whose unprepossessing features there seemed to be a cynical leer. Fenton was pondering upon the altered status of Catherine. If there was any truth in what she had told him she seemed to have suddenly changed from an enemy to a friend. "Rather too suddenly," thought Fenton, "for me to have much confidence in her." Yet it was difficult to understand what motive she could have in telling him the story of Urquhart's telephone message and showing him a few lines of meaningless nonsense. Unless, of course, some one had decided to give him a false trail to follow.

He looked at her tall, well-proportioned figure and wondered again why Urquhart had attracted her so strongly—if he had. That part of the story might be lies as well. In fact, all of it might be. Her face certainly looked drawn, her eyes larger than was natural, but to an experienced woman this alteration would present no great difficulty. Fenton's suspicions, built upon his own investigations and her police record, and partially lulled by her display of emotion, began to return with increasing vigour.

"Catherine," he said quietly.

"Yes?" She turned and looked at him.

"You remember the last time I was here? When you told me about having seen Malakoff emerging from the Café of the Thin Heron?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Will you tell me why you went to the Café that night after I had left you?" Fenton asked evenly.

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"I didn't go," said Catherine in surprise.

"Then what were you doing at 11.45 that night in Piekary Street walking away from the Café towards this flat?" demanded Fenton, an unusual hardness in his voice.

"You saw me?" Catherine gasped. "But I did not notice you. I——" She gave a nervous laugh. "As a matter of fact, I did intend to go to the Café. After you had left me I felt so lonely and was thinking so much about Martin that it occurred to me that I myself might have made more insistent inquiries at the Café. So I put on my things, late though it was, and went down there. When I got into the street where the Café stands there were a lot of men running about and shouting. Then I heard a crash of glass; so, thinking there was a fight in progress, I turned round and came home. That is all."

Still watching her intently, Fenton replied, "I went to the Café that night because of what you told me. While I was there somebody warned Josef Markevicius. I had to bolt for it, and was nearly shot."

Consternation and horror appeared on Catherine's face.

"You don't think that I---"

Fenton shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Catherine repeated in a whisper, staring at him with wide eyes. "What do you mean?" Suddenly she read the accusation in his gaze. She started forward. "Oh, Lawrie, Lawrie, you cannot believe that I am an accomplice of Malakoff's! That I——" She looked swiftly at Urquhart's photograph. "It's not possible that you should believe that!" she cried, and her voice reflected the intense agony of mind which she was undergoing. "I, an accomplice of Malakoff, Markevicius, the men whom I feel convinced have got Martin in their power!"

"And Wilenski," added Fenton quietly, not yet sure whether she was deceiving him or whether her emotion was real.

"Was he there too?"

"Yes. And two hours ago he told me that Josef Markevicius was concerned in a plot with other Lithuanians to restore to their country the territory annexed by Poland in 1920."

"Then don't you see," cried Catherine, reaching out imploring hands, "Martin must have discovered the plot, and they have taken good care that he should not

give them away."

"That had occurred to me," remarked Fenton caustically, "but Wilenski also said that Urquhart was under your influence. Then you telephone me urgently, adding as an additional attraction that you have heard from Urquhart. Wait," he said, as Catherine tried to speak. "Next you tell me a few more interesting things—how Urquhart behaved and how he left this paper, which certainly rang true—but how do I know that I shall ever be able to make use of them? How do I know that because I have perhaps learned too much I shall not go the same way as Urquhart? How do I know that Wilenski's story and yours are not part of a trap, and that desperate men may not be lying in wait for me, may even burst into this room and shoot me as I sit here?"

Catherine stared at him aghast. "You cannot think

that I would be party to that—to murder?"

Fenton's face showed quite plainly that he considered it was not beyond the realms of possibility. "Who was that who came in a little while ago?" he demanded.

"My maid. I said so then. Lawrie, I swear it was.

On my life I swear it."

Fenton watched her silently. Suddenly she sank into the chair opposite and buried her face in her hands.

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"Oh, God," she cried in muffled, agonized tones, "why does life play me such tricks? I had confidence and admiration for you, Lawrie. From you I drew strength and courage and hope. I counted on you in my thoughts, in the foolish way women have, as a sincere and trusting friend, and you repay me with the accusation that I have been party to an attempt to murder you. For me you have nothing but suspicion and contempt. It is a bitter blow, Lawrie, that you should consider me practically a murderess."

Fenton kept silent, for, even knowing what he did, he could not help being moved by her words. Yet he was fully aware of her cleverness, and also that many men in the Secret Service had thrown away their lives

because they had put their trust in women.

Suddenly Catherine got up and went again to the writing-table, from a drawer of which she took an automatic pistol. "Here," she said, holding it out to Fenton butt first, "take this. If you think there are men in the flat you are at liberty to search the place. I will go in front of you, and you may walk behind me with that pistol pointing at my back. At the first suspicious thing you may fire." She walked to the centre of the room and looked at him with an expression almost of contempt in her eyes. "Are you ready?"

Balancing the automatic in the palm of his hand, Fenton shook his head. "It is not the custom of Englishmen to shoot women, or even to seek protection

behind them."

"I should have remembered that." Catherine raised her arms and let them fall to her sides in a hopeless gesture as she resumed her seat. "You had better keep the pistol," she said with bitter sarcasm. "I might try to strangle you."

Quietly Fenton opened the butt and took out the

magazine.

"Oh, it's loaded!" sneered Catherine. "Did you think my offer was only another example of my diabolical trickery?"

Once more the hopelessness of the situation seemed to overwhelm her. Fenton's suspicions coming immediately on top of Martin's frenzied message were too much for her self-control. She buried her face in

her hands, and dry sobs shook her shoulders.

Fenton was quite aware that he was putting her through a species of third degree, but though he felt considerable sympathy for her, his safety depended on the truth of her statements, none of which could be corroborated, and as yet he was by no means convinced that she was as blameless as she would have him believe. He leaned forward and, grasping her wrists, pulled her hands from her face, forcing her to look at him.

"Catherine Borodoshin," he began in a low, even voice, at the same time watching her intently, "born in Kiev in 1900. Escaped into Poland in 1920. Until 1923 worked in Lemberg. In 1926, in Pinsk, seen in the company of Boris Nikoloff, a Red spy. Watched by the police. Went to Grodno. Was manageress of a club used by international spies. Further police surveillance. Returned to Pinsk, but left again in 1934 for Grodno, and then came to Wilno."

Catherine's eyes widened, and she struggled to draw back from him, but he would not release her wrists. With his eyes boring into hers he continued without

a pause:

"Martin Urquhart vanished while in your company. Malakoff has been known to you since 1926 in Pinsk on your own admission, and he is not the Professor Malakoff of Moscow Imperial College, but an impostor. You told me of Markevicius' café, where I was nearly shot, and afterwards I found you on the direct

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route from the café to your flat. Do you wonder I

suspect you?"

Catherine had ceased to struggle and was returning his gaze unwaveringly. "No," she whispered, "not now that I know you have my history, but I swear there is no ground for your belief. I have never tried to do you harm, never thought of it for one moment."

Fenton released her. She sat staring at him and rubbing her wrists where his grasp had left red marks. He made no attempt to speak, for he knew from experience the effect of silence on overwrought nerves.

It was very quiet in the little room.

"How can I prove my innocence?" Catherine said at last in a low voice, almost as if she was speaking to herself. "I can only assure you on my life that your suspicions of me are due to misunderstandings, or wrong interpretations of certain isolated incidents. As to my past, how can you, who have lived a sheltered life secure in England, understand the physical strain and mental agony of a refugee? My father was killed by the Bolsheviks. Thank God he never lived to see the ruin of Russia completed! My home was destroyed, my life in danger because I was one of the hated officer class. If I remained in Russia it meant certain death, either by shooting or starvation, but escape was by no means easy. In order to get over the frontier I was obliged to marry. Your police dossier"—she uttered the word contemptuously—" fails to mention that. He was a good man, my husband. I was young, frightened, and desperate, and he had sympathy for me. He gave me his name, and under his protection the Bolsheviks allowed me to go. I think he bribed our way out. He made no claims on me, but treated me as a sister, and afterwards in the confusion of a refugee camp, where numberless people were constantly being sent here, there, and everywhere, we became separated. From

that day to this I have never set eyes on him, nor been able to trace him. After all he had done for me it was only fair that I should at least offer him his freedom." She laughed bitterly. "It was almost the only thing I had to offer him."

"What was his name?" asked Fenton.

"Carl Kropf. He was a Swiss." Catherine rose and took a cigarette from the box on the shelf above the stove. She chose not to see Fenton's proffered lighter, and took her own from her handbag. "The fact remains that somewhere I have a husband, and, since I had no feelings for him but those of gratitude, my marriage was one of convenience in the truest sense."

She laughed shortly at her ironic joke.

"I need not trouble you with the unpleasant details of my life as a refugee, struggling to obtain the bare necessities of existence, and often not being very successful. My experiences were the same as thousands of others. There were times when I would gladly have blown out my brains or drowned myself, but for the fact that it seemed a shame to have come so far along a difficult road only to make a dismal end to the journey. Also I had a certain peculiar curiosity to see what lay around the next corner, to know if things could possibly get any worse. But I became hard, so hard that I did not think I should ever have any love or sympathy for anyone again. That has all changed since I met Martin," she added softly.

For a full minute she smoked her cigarette in silence. "As I have told you," she continued, "I met Malakoff in Pinsk at a time when I knew Boris Nikoloff. I did not realize then that Nikoloff was a spy. We were both Russians; he, I imagined, was a refugee like myself, and I was glad of his company. Then he wanted me to work for him, and I understood his real mission. I refused, and would have no more to do with him. I

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knew him then to be a Bolshevik, or, as I considered him, a traitor, and I had no reason to love the Reds, who had killed my father and ruined my life and home. I hated them, and still do.

"I did not tell all this to the police, for they would not have believed me. I knew that they would not find anything incriminating among my few belongings, so when I was questioned I merely pretended to be innocently surprised. I hope you will take that as the true account of my first meeting with Malakoff. As to the second incident about which you seem to have doubts, when I was manageress of that club I admit I suspected that it was being used as a meeting-place, if not for spies, at least for questionable people, but if you only knew how desperate I had become you would realize why I was ready to snatch at almost anything which would keep me from starvation. I had been out of work: my connexion with Nikoloff and the subsequent police proceedings had been enough to lose me my job. I was down to my last coin, always hungry, and dogged by the police, who took pains to make things unpleasant for me. I can tell you, Lawrie, despite its reputation and the morals of the people who used it, that club was a heaven to me while it lasted; but it meant more police inquiries. After that I went back to Pinsk."

She crushed out the end of her cigarette. "There, Lawrie, I have been quite frank with you. There is nothing in my past of which I need be ashamed, nor anything I have wittingly done which called for police action. I only pray you will believe me."

Fenton was about to speak when she held up her hand to check him.

"There is one other matter about which I confess I have not been frank. I have not told you the whole truth about the last time Martin was here. I should have said that Martin was the only man I have ever loved." A

faint rosy flush crept into her pale cheeks, and she looked away from Fenton, shading her eyes with her hand. "I mean that in the fullest sense of the term. When I told you that he left me late that night I was not speaking the truth. He did not go until dawn was breaking."

It would be putting it mildly to say that Fenton was surprised. Once more he wondered what Catherine could possibly have seen in the narrow-featured, sliteyed man whose portrait reposed on the shelf above the stove. Yet Catherine's words and manner bore the stamp of truth, and she was now gazing up at the photograph with an expression of intense rapture. Her eyes alone gave away the secret of her affections.

"I would have been his mistress from the beginning," she murmured, "but he was so strait-laced. That night however, things were different. A crisis was approaching. We both felt it, and though, perhaps, he knew what it was he would not tell me. So when he would have gone late that night I would not let him, and coaxed him to remain with me, because I loved him above everything else on earth, and I realized that he was greatly troubled by something which he would not or could not share with me. He fought for a while against my desires, but, well—our emotions were too much for us, as is so often the case with people in love when they are in great difficulties or facing some dreadful problem. It is at such times, I think, that the physical satisfaction of a great passion, springing from true affection, provides the one and only anodyne to all life's troubles. As I have said, I have loved but once in my life. Martin Urquhart was my lover, and I am proud of it, for that night is sacred to me."

She withdrew her eyes from the photograph and looked straight at Fenton, who had the grace to feel

acutely embarrassed.

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"I kept my promise to wake him when the sun rose," Catherine continued, "and after he had gone"—she smiled wanly—"I shall never forget his kiss and the pressure of his arm about my shoulders—after he had gone I lay there dreaming of the happiness which I felt certain lay hidden in the future for us both. When at last I got up the first thing I saw was that folded slip of paper beside the chair on which he had put his clothes. Not between the cushions of the settee, as I said just now."

She ceased speaking for a moment, and sat gazing starry-eyed into the past. Fenton considered the toe

of his shoe with intense interest.

"I shall never regret one moment of that night," Catherine whispered, as the tears welled into her eyes. "I treasure the memory of every second of it. Maybe it is all I shall have to remember Martin by. I never thought to tell any man, nor is it an easy thing for a woman to speak about. I should have liked to keep it a secret between Martin and me, a precious secret, but if it will prove to you that I am not Martin's enemy, nor yours either, then I am glad to share it. It is the only remaining thing I can do to prove my good faith, and I do it because I believe you wish Martin well, and that you will be able to help both of us."

She swallowed and bit her lip, and then, suddenly turning, looked full at Fenton. "I have done my best," she said quietly. "The decision is in your hands. You may believe me or you may not. When you leave this flat you will go either as an ally and my dearest friend, and that I pray for, or you will go as a stranger, obviously regarding me as your enemy, and we shall

not meet or speak again."

Suddenly the strength seemed to go from her. Her shoulders drooped, and her head sank upon her breast. She sat motionless, staring at the floor, the tears still glistening on her cheeks.

Fenton rose quietly and, crossing to her chair, took both her hands in his and drew her to her feet. Her lips parted, and a questioning look crept into her eyes. "I apologize," he said quietly. "I can only plead that appearances and my information were so dead against you that I had no alternative but to believe what I did. I hope that you will forgive me. As to your secret, I have forgotten it. It remains a secret between you and Martin. I remember only a woman whom I am proud to call my friend, though I do not deserve her friend-ship, and one for whom I have a sincere admiration."

With a glad cry Catherine threw her arms about his neck and buried her face upon his shoulder. "Oh, Lawrie, thank God my plea was not in vain!" she said in muffled tones. "If you had refused to believe

me I don't know what I should have done."

Fenton patted her shoulder and murmured words of comfort. His eye caught sight of Urquhart's photograph, and the cynical leer seemed to be more pronounced than ever. With his free hand Fenton made a rude and schoolboyish gesture towards it. Somehow such childish reaction helped to relieve the strain which had been put upon his feelings.

"And shall we find Martin, do you think?"

Catherine asked hopefully.

Fenton raised her chin and smiled gravely into her eyes. "If we have to search every square foot of Poland we shall find him," he answered.

He did not, however, feel quite so confident as his words suggested.

CHAPTER X

We Have an Obvious Clue

IT was considerably after one in the morning when Fenton left Catherine; but even so directly he reached his rooms he sat down to study the one tangible clue which Urquhart had left behind him. Wreathed in cigarette smoke, with the silence of the early morning broken only by the distant rumbling of a market cart over the cobblestones, Fenton read and re-read the lines concerning the herons and the blue water.

There was now no longer any doubt or suspicion in his mind about Catherine. Her confession had come straight from her heart, and if she had rehearsed the scene for a whole year she could not have brought to it just that touch of sincerity and pathos. There are limits beyond which mere deception cannot go. This was one of them. Fenton was firmly convinced that there was nothing which Catherine would not do, even to the extent of sacrificing her life, to rescue her lover. had already admitted to Fenton that she had been trying tentatively to carry out investigations by herself, but the surveillance of the police made this extremely difficult, and when Fenton asked why she had not confided in him before she replied that she realized that her police record, combined with the fact that Urquhart had vanished from her flat, had made her a suspected person whom no one would trust. She was, indeed, somewhat astonished that she had not been arrested.

Three o'clock had struck before Fenton went to bed. The night had been an emotional one, and he had felt the strain of it, and when he had found his attention wandering from the paper in front of him he realized

that in his present tired state it was useless to work any longer on the puzzle. After an early breakfast, however, he procured a map from the Consular offices, and in the privacy of his own room he began to study it in conjunction with the tracing of the north-east of Poland which he had taken from Wilenski and the Urquhart clue.

As he sipped his coffee certain features of the map which he was using impinged themselves upon his mind. He noticed that north-west of a place named Swir, at no great distance from Wilno, there was a lake, and that a stream ran from there, passing the town of Widze to the west, crossed the river Dzisna, and joined up with a second lake.

"'The Herons fly north of still blue water,'" Fenton murmured; "'they follow the path of laughing water, and are greeted by its merriment again as they fly north.'" He scratched his nose thoughtfully, and turned to the tracing of North-east Poland. An electric thrill shot through him as he saw that the two lakes, the stream, and the river Dzisna were all marked. He knew that the country in that area was rich in streams, swamps, lakes, and forests. In a small map it would be impossible to delineate them all. Yet these two lakes, the streams, and the river were, in conjunction with a few others, plainly marked.

He bent over the tracing again, and a few minutes' further study satisfied him that no other combination of lakes and streams exactly fitted the words of Urquhart's clue.

"I may be barking up the wrong tree," he muttered, "but it seems reasonable to suppose that 'still blue water' refers to a lake and 'laughing water' to a running stream. And 'greeted by its merriment again' sounds as if there was a hiatus which might be the point where the river Dzisna intersects, or appears to intersect, the

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stream." He pulled at his cigarette. "Oh, devilish clever, Lawrie, my boy!" he soliloquized. "But just where does it get you?"

A further quarter of an hour's intense concentration proved that it got him nowhere, and he turned to the second and last sentence of the clue.

"'At last they rest in the heronry where three lands meet, with the moon on one hand and a pig on the other —and still there is quiet blue water.' Well, a heronry is a natural place for herons to forgather, and this one is where three lands meet. Poland is surrounded by lands just here-Russia, Lithuania, and Latvia. So we have our choice, but, bearing in mind that this matter concerned Lithuania, according to friend Wilenski, I think we'd better plump for that. Somewhere on the Polish-Lithuanian frontier there should be a heronry, if this jargon means anything at all. The exact spot should be with the moon on one hand and a pig on the other. Very illuminating. Sounds like a nursery rhyme of the farmyard variety. 'And still there is quiet blue water'? I suppose that's the blooming duck-pond."

An intense perusal of the maps gave him no fresh information, and with a sigh he put the papers safely away and went downstairs to attend to his Consular duties. But all that day the problem was at the back of his mind, and he kept worrying away at it as a dog worries a bone. Yet at the end he felt like an old dog with no teeth, for he had failed to make any impression on his particular bone. And then, once again in his own room with the papers before him, he decided that a map on a larger scale might help him. He got out his car and drove to various shops in the city which might be expected to stock large-scale maps, and at his fifth inquiry he was successful. He returned to his rooms, and eagerly spread the map out on a table. His eyes ran up and down the Lithuanian frontier, and suddenly,

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with a cry of "Got him!" he jabbed his finger on a town on the Lithuanian side named Ezerenai. On the left of the town the large-scale map showed a lake shaped like a half-moon, and on the right was one shaped

like a ham. This, presumably, was the 'pig.'

Fenton sat back and thoughtfully lit a cigarette. The problem seemed to have been solved. The first sentence was intended to show the direction which the Herons, undoubtedly Josef Markevicius and his fellow-plotters, took, while the second sentence referred to their destination. Fenton wondered how Urquhart had got hold of the clue. The fact that the original was written in the Lithuanian language rather pointed to the possibility of a traitor in the Lithuanian camp. However, speculation was profitless, for the only person who could answer the question satisfactorily was Urquhart himself. Was Urquhart at Ezerenai? Fenton fingered his chin. It was possible. The heronry sounded like the head-quarters of the Herons.

"I think," murmured Fenton, "I will indulge in a spot of ornithology. I will go and look for to see this

heronry."

He was well aware that such a visit might prove dangerous. Therefore it behoved him to take precautions and lay down, if not lines of retreat, at least a trail by which those who came after could follow him. He reached for the telephone and asked for Warsaw 40961. But Gustav Kovel was still absent. Would he leave a message? No, Fenton replied, he would not. Though he had no objection to telling Kovel about his discoveries, he had no wish to broadcast them to the odds and ends of the secret police. Another plan would have to be devised. It was annoying, because Fenton had wished particularly to inform Gustav about Catherine. However, the clearing of Catherine would have to wait, unless—— A sudden thought occurred to Fenton.

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After dinner that night he went to Catherine's flat, having warned her by telephone that he intended to call.

"Have you made any sense out of it?" was her first question, and he knew she was referring to Urquhart's clue.

"I think so," he replied, and at that an eager light

appeared in her eyes.

He explained his interpretation of the clue, showing her copies of the maps he had used. Catherine was quick to understand him.

"And are you going to Ezerenai?"

He nodded. "Yes, and I want you to be part of my line of communication. I have a notion that one man will stand a better chance of seeing this through than would a squad of police."

"In spite of what has happened to Martin?" she

asked anxiously.

"Yes. One man might be able to find his way to the headquarters of the Herons without being detected."

"You are taking a tremendous risk."

He grinned at her cheerfully. His life had been spent in taking risks; one more or less would not make much difference, and he had resolutely shut out thoughts of Stella and his son Peter.

"Let us say a slight risk. For that reason I have told you what I know. If I fail to communicate with you within a few days of my departure you must ring up 40961, a Warsaw number, and repeat what I have said to Gustav Kovel, a friend of mine. I expect you know the number," he said with a smile.

"Yes," admitted Catherine, "but how do you know that I do?" And she was surprised when he related how he had found that Gustav's card had been disturbed during her first visit to the Consulate.

Once more he went over the story which in certain circumstances Catherine might have to tell, and he knew

that in the telling she would inevitably prove her own integrity to Gustav Kovel. Thus Fenton would be killing two birds with one stone. If she had no reason to communicate with Kovel, then the proof of her innocence could wait until Fenton returned.

"And when do you go?" Catherine asked.

"As soon as I can get away," said Fenton. "As I have an official position I can't slip off like a private individual."

When Catherine let him out of the flat she looked him in the face with that level, steady gaze he knew so well. "You will take care, won't you?" she said earnestly. "I could not bear to think that you and Martin were both lost."

He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry. I shall turn up smiling. But I will let you know without fail when I leave Wilno."

The following morning, however, an unforeseen difficulty cropped up, for Wilenski asked Fenton if he might have a week's leave.

"It is a matter of family bereavement," the little man explained, "and if possible I want to put my mother's affairs in order. Her home is not far from here, at Jaszuny, to be precise, but it may take some little time."

Fenton, who had already noticed that Wilenski was in mourning and somewhat agitated, offered his sympathy, and readily gave his subordinate permission to depart as soon as he liked. The Pole was grateful in his curious taciturn manner, and withdrew after expressing the hope that Fenton would not be put to any inconvenience.

When the communicating door had closed Fenton adjusted his monocle, put his feet on his desk, and blew a contemplative smoke-ring towards the ceiling.

"It never occurred to me that our earnest and pedantic little friend had a mother," he murmured. "I imagined, like Topsy, he just happened. Or possibly he was the

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result of a careless blending of chemicals, under pressure. The first and original synthetic human. Yes, I'm doubtful about his late and lamented mother. The mortality among grandmothers of office-boys when the Australians are playing at Lord's is proverbial, and it seems to me that Wilenski's mother belongs to the same variety. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the herons aren't swarming, or whatever it is herons do when they gather together in large numbers."

Wilenski left the offices at once, after thanking Fenton again for his kindness, whereupon Fenton asked Helen to ring up the British Embassy in Warsaw. When the connexion was made Fenton was mildly surprised at the rapidity with which he was put through to Lord Braxted. He had anticipated various kinds of excuses and obstacles before His Excellency could be disturbed.

Fenton chose to be guarded in his conversation, which no doubt was soothing to the diplomatic mind of the Ambassador. He explained that some leave, length not specified, would be useful in order that he might more fully investigate a certain case he had on hand. Doubtless he should have approached the Consul in Warsaw, but he thought Lord Braxted probably understood more about the case in question.

Yes, Lord Braxted had a fair grasp of the case, but why could not Mr Wilenski take over? Fenton explained that Mr Wilenski had gone to attend to the affairs of his deceased mother—or so he said, a remark which left Lord Braxted somewhat perplexed. Was Mr Fenton making any progress with the case in question? Yes, during the last few days things had been going well. Perhaps Mr Fenton would care to make a report? Mr Fenton would not until he had gone a little further into the matter.

"I suppose he hopes I am going to tell him the story, and then he'll put some one else on it to complete the

job and pouch the five thousand," thought Fenton.

That is called diplomacy."

"I am afraid I have nothing of much interest to say," he replied. "All I want is some one to take over the office. If I may, I should like to suggest young Carson."

"Mr Carson?" said Lord Braxted reprovingly.

" Why?"

"I think it would be good for him," chuckled Fenton. "Oh, there's one other thing. Can you trace a Carl Kropf, a Swiss, escaped as a refugee from Russia in 1920? I believe he came over near Ostki." He added a few more details which Catherine had been able to give him, and Lord Braxted intimated that he would have inquiries made.

Carson arrived about noon the next day, considerably surprised at his temporary appointment, which, to say the least of it, was unusual, and inclined to be facetious. "What's the giddy idea?" he demanded. "Why are you deserting the Empire in this way? Aren't you aware that the British Constitution has been rocked to its foundations?"

"I know, old chap," grinned Fenton, "but you're just the fellow to hold it together. And, after all, you're not

the only one who wants leave."

"That I can understand, but you've not been here five minutes. It's unheard of. How did you manage it?"

"Never you mind; it's not good for little boys to know. And now let me put you wise to your work. I dare say you'll make a mess of it, and I shall have to return you to Warsaw, but at least you can make a shot at it."

"I like that from one who has not even mastered the

elements of his job himself," retorted Carson.

"There's no need to. Actually the Consulate is run by the stenographer, Helen Lenk. By the way, do you like blondes?"

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"Of course. All gentlemen prefer them."

"That's why I wondered if you did," came the swift reply. "Helen is a blonde, and a good girl—"

"Good Lord, and you've been here how long?"

"But I believe she has leanings the other way," continued Fenton, as if Carson had not spoken, "so try not to trifle with her young affections. She's at an impressionable age and unaccustomed to meeting roués from the big cities, so don't get telling her any fairy-tales about marrying her in Warsaw if she will fly with you, because she might believe you."

"Well, if she's resisted your advances I should say

she'll be safe enough with me."

They both laughed.

"Anyway," said Fenton, "Helen will tell you all you want to know. There are just one or two things here that I'll show you."

After lunch Fenton threw a few clothes into a suitcase, shook hands with Carson, made a few facetious remarks to Helen, and drove round to Catherine's flat. When he told her that he was about to leave for Ezerenai she caught her breath and turned away.

"I don't like the idea," she said. "I've a presentiment

that something is going to happen."

"Quite likely something will," replied Fenton cheerfully, "but not necessarily anything very dreadful. Remember, too, that we can do nothing towards finding Martin by sitting still in Wilno. We have an obvious clue, and we must follow it up."

"Oh, I know, I know!" cried Catherine. "You are taking the common-sense view, but it seems to me that

the future is very dark and forbidding."

"That's why I am going to let a little light into it,"

Fenton replied quietly.

The altered tone had an instant effect on Catherine. "I'm behaving like a temperamental schoolgirl," she

said, "for which I apologize. Of course you are doing the right thing, and I wish you the very best of luck."

"That's better," smiled Fenton. "And now remember all I have told you. I shall communicate with you somehow within three days. I can't make it sooner than that, because I can't be sure exactly where my wanderings will take me, but when you do hear from me I hope it will be good news."

"I hope so too," she whispered, "and if you can bring Martin back to me I shall never be able to repay you."

"To see you happy with him will be sufficient reward," Fenton said gallantly. Acting on a sudden impulse, he bent and kissed the hand she held out to him, and felt her grip tighten quickly on his fingers.

"I did not know Englishmen did that," she laughed.

"Most of them don't. They are too shy. Au revoir, Catherine."

At the foot of the stairs he turned and threw her a kiss. He was too far away to see the tears which sprang into her eyes. For Catherine's forebodings, in spite of her quick change of mood, had increased. Of the three men in her life for whom she had cared most one, her father, was dead, another, Martin, had disappeared, and the third, Lawrie, had just left her—for what? Would he too go out of her life?

She sank on to the settee and became the prey of many troubled thoughts, while Fenton, having negotiated the narrow streets of Wilno, drove steadily north-eastward. Hour after hour he sat at the wheel, and even when darkness fell he did not stop. It was well over a hundred and fifty miles to Ezerenai, and some of the roads were likely to be poor, but he had good headlights, and with as reliable a map as he could procure he hoped to cross the frontier early the following day.

The north-east of Poland is not densely populated, and the country is wild forest and marsh. Once Fenton

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thought he was bogged, but by skilful manipulation of the clutch and accelerator he contrived to prevent the rear wheels from digging pits for themselves from which they could not have climbed. On another occasion he made a bad choice of roads, and was forced to return after finding himself at the end of a blind track amid dense trees. Had it been daylight no doubt he would have admired the scenery, but the most that he could see was the rough surface of the road ahead of him and the boles of the trees lit up by the white glare of his headlamps.

By half-past eight the route had become somewhat confusing, for there seemed to be an inordinate number of branch roads. Probably they were no more than timber-tracks, but, passing them in the darkness, Fenton could not be sure. At nine o'clock by his wrist-watch his speed had dropped to a mere crawl, for the road twisted and turned in a way which no reasonable road should.

Ten minutes later it ceased altogether.

Fenton pulled up with a muttered curse, for he now realized that at some point or other he must have gone off his route. He consulted his pocket compass, but was unable to gather much comfort from it. It was evident that he had been foolish to attempt to drive through unknown country at night. The roads were badly sign-posted, and because of the dispute between Lithuania and Poland, which had resulted in the frontier being closed for the best part of twenty years, no attempt had been made to keep them in good condition.

Fenton smote his hands together in order to get some warmth into them, for the night was chilly and a cold rain had begun to fall. There was no moon, and light, grey clouds covered the sky. Visibility was far from good. Away to the right the beginning of a wood crowned a slight rise in the ground. To the left the country was flat, and in the grey drizzle objects were

difficult to distinguish. There was not a gleam of light anywhere. It was a comfortless outlook, and there seemed to be no other course but to spend a damp and

chilly night in the open.

A cold, whispering wind stole across the flats as Fenton tucked a rug more firmly about him and switched off the lights. His car was a coupé, and fortunately reasonably draught proof. None the less he did not look forward with any eagerness to the next seven hours. He was on the point of closing his eyes when a distant rumble caused him to sit up inquiringly. Away on his left hand a dull red glow showed through the rain. The rumble increased to a roar, the red glow brightened, and was followed by a line of yellow lights, which passed across his left front and vanished into the murk. Fenton switched on the dashboard light and consulted his map. Unless he was more hopelessly lost than he thought the train which had just passed must be on the line which ran from Wilno to Daugavpils, and it could not be more than half a mile away. With any luck there might be a signalman's hut somewhere along that line, or perhaps even a village.

The prospect of warmth and food heartened Fenton. He took torch and compass and set out to search for the track. So long as he kept to that he could not very well lose himself, and even if he explored for an hour or two at least the night would pass more quickly. Again he cursed his own foolishness, and shivered as the rain

trickled down the back of his neck.

CHAPTER XI

The Englishman Who Has Been Expected

But Fenton's luck had not entirely deserted him that night, for when he reached the railway and climbed the embankment to obtain a better view of the countryside he saw a short distance away a subdued yellow light gleaming through the thin drizzle. Five minutes later he was knocking at the door of a small log hut which stood on the edge of a wood. A peep through the window had shown him the rough interior of a peasant dwelling, with a tall, grey-bearded Pole sitting at a table, obviously home-made, drinking from a mug.

In response to his knocking there was a sound of shuffling feet within the hut, the door was flung open, and the bearded Pole peered at Fenton, who, with the rain dripping off his hat-brim and running down his cheeks, stood miserably in the stream of light which came from the lamp. He explained that he would be grateful for shelter during the night, as he had lost his way and his car did not make a very comfortable bedroom.

"Come in!" cried the Pole heartily. "Men call me Old Karas, and I've never turned anyone from my door yet."

He led the way into the interior of the hut. A wood fire burned at one end of the room, the smoke escaping by way of a wide chimney. Fenton was glad to warm his chilled body, and after taking off his wet overcoat he crouched by the stone hearth and got some feeling back into his wet, reddened hands. The lamp on the table shed a comforting light. The walls of the hut were of roughly trimmed logs packed with moss and

clay, the floor of hard-beaten earth. From the side opposite the door by which Fenton had entered two other doors led to the bedrooms. The table, besides bearing Old Karas's mug and a bottle of Schnapps, was littered with the broken remnants of a meal, and a kettle and an iron pot stood at the side of the stone hearth. The only furniture besides the table were some shelves containing a few dishes and plates, a roughly made cupboard in the corner, and three stools.

Old Karas brought a tin mug from one of the shelves, and splashed a liberal measure of Schnapps into it. "Here," he cried, "drink this! It will warm you and keep away the rheumatism." He spoke in Polish, but with a rustic accent which did not make his words easy for Fenton to understand.

The fiery spirit burned Fenton's throat, but in a few moments he felt a warm glow stealing through him. He sat down on a stool and looked at his host, who was still standing by the table. Old Karas was over six feet in height and broad in proportion. His face was deeply lined, and his eyes were watery and red-rimmed. As he lifted up his mug to drink he swayed a little, for in spite of much practice he had been drinking heavily, and the Schnapps affected him.

"Look at me!" he cried, putting down his mug. "I'm over sixty, and as strong and healthy as a man half my age." As if to give the lie to his statement he coughed distressingly from deep down in his great chest. "That's only the smoke," he explained. "It gets into every charcoal-burner's lungs. Kills some of them, too. But not Old Karas." He nodded drunkenly. "Oh, no. Old Karas knows how to keep alive. This "—he tapped the bottle of Schnapps—"this does it. Good for you. Good for the chest. Oh, yes, Old Karas knows."

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He filled his mug, and with the square-cornered bottle in hand sat down on a stool on the opposite side of the fireplace to Fenton.

"It's good of you to take me in like this," said the latter. "It would have been very cold and unpleasant

in my car."

"Old Karas never refuses anybody." With an uncertain lurch he tipped more liquor into Fenton's mug. "Drink up. It's good for you. Keeps out the rheumatism. Only women and rabbits aren't expected to drink. But I've known one or two who did-women, I mean. I could tell vou some fine times I've had." He chuckled hoarsely. "When a woman gets a drop of this inside her"—he waved the bottle of Schnapps generously— "there's no knowing what may happen. Once when

But Fenton considered it wise to stop this threatened flow of reminiscence before it became too strong. He was not in the least interested in this drunken old reprobate's lascivious adventures.

"I think I must have got off the track somewhere," he interrupted. "Can you tell me where the road to Daugavpils lies?"

"Daugavpils? Daugavpils? Oh, the road. There's only one road here that goes anywhere important, and that's over there." He pointed in a direction away from where Fenton had left his car. Suddenly he bent forward, staring intently from beneath his shaggy brows. "Where have you come from?"

"Wilno," Fenton replied. "I was foolish to drive in

the dark."

Old Karas's beard parted in a pleased smile, and he laughed. "I thought so," he cried triumphantly. "You speak Polish, but you are no Pole. You have the words, but not the accent." He shook a solemn forefinger. "You can't deceive Old Karas. Oh, no!"

He took a long drink from the mug and coughed

raspingly.

"No one can hoodwink Old Karas. Not even Jadwiga, my granddaughter." He paused and blinked his red-rimmed eyes. "Are you the Englishman who has been expected in these parts?"

The question shook Fenton like a jolt in the ribs. "Has an Englishman been expected here, then?" he

temporized.

"Oh, yes. I have heard——" Old Karas began, but suddenly ceased, as if he had remembered something. He sat staring at Fenton, his heavy brows bent with the effort of concentration, drinking occasionally from his mug.

When the silence threatened to become interminable Fenton remarked with a casual air which he was far from feeling, "I suppose this Englishman will come here to hunt?" He knew there was some good shooting

to be had in the province.

Old Karas burst into a succession of throaty chuckles. "Oh, yes, he will hunt—perhaps. But perhaps he will find that his quarry will hunt him. Ha, ha, ha!"

"This," thought Fenton, "looks like being an interesting evening, if only I can keep sober. Much more of this firewater and I shall be crying into my host's beard, even if it has got the remains of his last meal in it."

But Old Karas seemed to think he had said enough. No matter how he hinted and coaxed, Fenton could not persuade him to speak again about the unknown Englishman. Instead the Pole, after emptying the remains of the Schnapps into his mug, drifted into a sentimental and maudlin mood. He yearned apparently for his lost youth, so that he could participate in the good times which were happening close by.

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"But women don't want old men," he said morosely. "We are nothing but a nuisance. Ah, if I was twenty years younger! I can tell you when I was a lad—well, perhaps I'd better not." He drank deeply, and after an ineffectual attempt to hold it upright his head lolled on his chest.

"What are those good times of which you spoke?" asked Fenton.

"Ah, yes, they are good times," mumbled Karas, on whom at last the Schnapps seemed to be having considerable effect. "I am told that Lithuanian girls are enticed over the frontier in order to afford our noble soldiers some amusement. We didn't think of that when I was a young man. And now I am too old, too old."

He brooded morosely for a time on his misfortune. Then he looked up at Fenton with an unpleasant leer in his rheumy eyes. "They come over as girls," he chuckled, "and our soldiers send them back as full-blown women. Don't you think it is good of our men to work thus for the education of a lot of filthy Lithuanians?"

"Perhaps the Lithuanians don't think so," Fenton retorted. "How would you like it if one day the Lithuanians took Jadwiga, your granddaughter whom you mentioned just now, and treated her in the same

way?"

"Eh?" stuttered Karas, blinking at the unexpected suggestion. "The swine wouldn't dare to do that. They are too frightened of us." He pondered for a moment with narrowed lids. "All the same, it may happen one day to Jadwiga or some other maid." Suddenly he stared fiercely at Fenton, a curious fanatical light in his eyes. "Then we shall strike, for we shall have plenty of justification. Apologies will be refused, and Lithuania will be no more, for Poland is very strong. Lithuania!

Ah, that will give Poland a better outlet to the sea than

the present port of Gdynia!"

Fenton looked at the drunken old man thoughtfully. These were peculiar views for a mere charcoal-burner to hold. Why should he be interested in politics and the Polish Corridor? Surely they were rather abstruse subjects for a man of his rustic standing? The obvious explanation seemed to be that Karas had heard the arguments elsewhere, and in his present maudlin state was merely repeating them.

Fenton glanced round the room. The lamp was smoking, and Karas had fallen into a stupor on his stool. He rose and turned down the wick. He was quite ready to go to sleep, but his host seemed to have forgotten his existence. Fenton was about to put a fresh log on the fire, which had burned low, when a slight, girlish figure emerged from the back portion of the hut. This, thought Fenton, must be Jadwiga. She was a round, flat-featured girl, about eighteen, who could not by any stretch of imagination be called good-looking. She curtseyed to Fenton.

"I heard you come," she explained. "I suppose Grandpa has gone to sleep. It is always the same when he has been paid, and I can do nothing with him." She shook Old Karas roughly by the shoulder. "Wake

up!" she cried. "You must go to bed."

"Eh?" The old man pulled himself together and groped vaguely towards the table. "Where's the Schnapps?"

"There's none. It is all gone," replied Jadwiga shortly. "Now come along, and be careful where you

put your great clumsy feet.3

Mumbling into his beard and not taking the least notice of Fenton, Old Karas suffered himself to be led away, which tended to show that his granddaughter could after all do something with him.

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Jadwiga returned in a few moments, apologized for her relative's behaviour, and said she would prepare a bed for Fenton. But he, guessing that she would have to sacrifice her own, insisted that he would be just as comfortable with a couple of blankets beside the fire. His clothes and manner tended to belie the fact that he was accustomed to roughing it, and Jadwiga was somewhat perturbed, little knowing that her guest had been forced into far less comfortable quarters in his time.

Presently, however, he was securely rolled in warm blankets, the lamp had been extinguished, and extra logs had been piled on the fire. Except for the crackling of the burning wood and the heavy, stertorous breathing of Old Karas in the next room the silence of the night was unbroken. But Fenton could not go to sleep. Possibly he had taken sufficient Schnapps to make him restless, and not enough to create drowsiness. He lay staring at the dancing flames and the red sparks which occasionally fled up the wide chimney. Certain words which Karas had spoken disturbed him strangely.

Apart from the fact that the anticipated visit of an Englishman in the district might be no more than a coincidence, the Pole's remarks about Poland attacking Lithuania started a niggling train of thought in Fenton's mind. Feelings between the two countries had never been of the best, but such a spark as Karas had suggested might well explode the European powder

magazine.

Russia would probably feel obliged to safeguard the independence of Lithuania, which would certainly not please Germany, for there were strong Nazi parties in Memel and Danzig, while the Polish Corridor separating Germany from East Prussia had caused considerable discontent in the Fatherland. Another fruitful source

of trouble lay in the common knowledge that both Poland and Lithuania had struggled for some hundreds of years to secure their independence, and, having at last obtained it as a result of the Great War, neither was likely to surrender it without a fight. Fenton cogitated on the matter for some time, remembering Wilenski's words about a Lithuanian plot to restore that part of the country which Poland, by breaking a treaty made two days before, seized on October 9, 1920. Yet here was Karas hinting at aggression not by Lithuania, but by Poland. The last thought which came into Fenton's mind before he sank into an uneasy sleep was that it was little short of a miracle that peace had been kept in this part of Europe for the past generation.

The following morning, Old Karas having departed like a bear with a sore head about his business of charcoal-burning, Fenton, after an early breakfast, was escorted back to his car by Jadwiga, and directed to the road which he had left the previous night. Jadwiga would take no payment for the night's lodging, a circumstance which would have annoyed Karas immensely

had he known.

As the road approached the Lithuanian frontier, so it became worse, for Fenton had left the main road to Daugavpils. There was no traffic, apart from an occasional peasant's cart. Fenton's speed was forced down and down, until, with the road petering out into a muddy track in which the car skidded with spinning back-wheels, he changed finally into bottom gear. Had the rain of the previous night been heavier the road would have been impassable.

At length, after a tiring journey, Fenton arrived at the Polish frontier post, an object of great curiosity to the soldiers stationed there. An ordinary traveller would have doubtless experienced difficulties and

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delays, but Fenton's diplomatic passport took him past the barrier with unusual promptitude, the soldiers indicating the direction of the Lithuanian post on the far side of a slight rise in the flat countryside. Here Fenton, after considerable bumping over the rough grass, for the road had ceased altogether, was again regarded with some surprise, but probably his appearance on the almost dead frontier was put down to the well-known eccentricities of wandering Englishmen. Without hindrance he drove off in the direction of Ezerenai, the road gradually improving as he got farther into Lithuania.

In due course Fenton drove into Ezerenai, and as he entered the main square of the town he saw, with something of a shock, a beautifully carved statue of a heron standing at the foot of a miniature waterfall in the midst of some ornamental gardens. He wondered if by any chance the heron constituted some national or, more probably, municipal symbol. He questioned the waiter on the subject at the hotel where he had lunch.

"Oh, no, sir," smiled the man. "You will find many models, statues, and carvings of herons in Ezerenai. Not far from the town is a famous heronry on a lake where there are thousands of herons of all types and kinds. We have a lot of visitors come here who are interested in the birds."

"Zoologists, ornithologists, and men of science, I suppose?" Fenton suggested.

"That is so, sir," said the waiter politely, understand-

ing only the last part of the sentence.

"And have you ever heard of a thin heron?" Fenton asked casually.

The waiter smiled. "It is curious that you should mention that. There is a famous café known as the Café of the Thin Heron in Ezerenai."

"Is there, indeed? You surprise me. Where is it?"

The waiter told him, and, having eaten a leisurely meal, Fenton set out to examine the café and its environs. But he did not immediately seek the street in which it was situated. He had a feeling that he was now in dangerous territory, and that his movements would very likely be watched. Possibly even the informative waiter might be questioned as to the subject of his conversation with the casual guest who wore an

eyeglass and clothes of English cut.

So Fenton contented himself with strolling about the main streets of the town and looking in the shopwindows. In the Secret Service to be too obvious is to court probable disaster, and Fenton wished to be taken for a passing visitor. There were many shops with contents designed to attract the eye of the tourist in search of souvenirs, shops which in England flourish under the name of fancy goods, which means that they stock considerable quantities of articles of incredible uselessness. In all the ones at which Fenton paused the heron was predominant. There were herons in every conceivable material, herons put to a variety of uses, herons which decorated screens and blotting-pads, herons which opened their beaks and nodded their heads, herons which at the touch of a spring swallowed miniature fish that had to be retrieved by pulling a string.

At a toyshop, however, he saw a heron fashioned in some soft material with the object of pleasing the infant eye and touch. "Just the thing," thought Fenton, "for young Peter." Or was it? He was a trifle dubious of the age at which babies began to take notice of such things, but at any rate it would probably please the child at some future date, and at least it would show that he had not entirely forgotten his wife and family. He bought the heron, and had it dispatched by post to England.

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Then it occurred to him that it might be prudent to purchase some trifle for Stella; not that she altogether deserved it. Her letters had been very short and irregular of late, but anyway she was his wife, and he loved her, and little things like this meant a lot to women.

He found a silversmith's with a rather nice little silver heron in flight exhibited in the window. It was the sort of thing which a woman would wear on a chain or bangle or as a brooch.

When, however, Fenton interviewed the assistant in the shop the man denied that anything of the kind was

in stock.

"But, my dear fellow, it is there in the window," explained Fenton.

Perplexed, the man pulled back the sliding screen which shut off the window from the shop, whereupon Fenton pointed to the heron.

"Ah, so," muttered the assistant, and looked at his customer in a queer way. "I do not know whether that is for sale."

Without further argument Fenton reached out and took up the charm. "Well, it has a price on it, anyway."

At that moment a stout man, whom Fenton took to be the proprietor, entered the shop from the back premises and demanded to know the trouble. The assistant explained.

"I am sorry," said the stout man. "That is not for

Fenton raised his eyebrows. "But it is in the window, and there is a price on it. And here is your money." He placed some coins on the counter.

"I tell you it is not for sale," repeated the proprietor firmly. "It is a mistake, and should not have been in

the window."

"Well, that's your error," chuckled Fenton. "I've

bought it and paid for it."

And he sauntered out of the door, well pleased at having brought off a deal which the silversmith obviously did not wish to complete. Presently he began to wonder why, and although he kept his eyes open he did not see a similar trinket in any of the shops of Ezerenai—which, in a town bespattered with all kinds of souvenirs, struck him as peculiar.

It was not until after five o'clock that he made his way towards the Café of the Thin Heron, which was situated at the end of a narrow cul-de-sac. When Fenton discovered this he pulled a face, for he saw that throughout the length of the street anyone approach-

ing the Café must be under observation.

The Café was a vast improvement on its namesake in Wilno. There was a carpeted vestibule and a commissionaire. Herons abounded everywhere, slightly more emaciated certainly than the ones which decorated the shop-windows, but still indubitably herons. Fenton was growing a trifle tired of herons. The interior of the Café, which had some fifty tables, a small stage, and a space for dancing, enlarged on the motive. There were herons in every attitude and engaged in all the occupations common to the species. There were frescoes of herons in flight, the tablecloths were decorated with them, the china bore them in profusion.

"What wouldn't I give for a glimpse of a good barndoor cockerel?" sighed Fenton as he selected a table

and gave his order.

The Café was half full of ordinary, everyday people, such as are accustomed to gather in cafés about the time of afternoon tea. They seemed to be expecting something to happen, for many of them were looking towards the stage. Presently a ripple of applause greeted the appearance of a slim, dark-eyed girl in a

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black velvet frock, who came into view as a piano struck up the opening bars of a dance tune which Fenton had heard in London two years before.

The girl, a pretty enough lass in her way, sang the words in French. Her voice was good, and in spite of its age the audience liked the song, for they demanded an encore. This time the girl chose quite a different type of music, but as she sang in Lithuanian Fenton had not the remotest idea what it was all about. There was a peculiarly mournful wailing chorus repeated at the end of each verse, and on the whole it appeared to be very like an interminable folk-song. Half-way through it the girl descended from the stage to the dance floor. The song called for many gestures, but what most attracted Fenton's attention was the tiny silver heron which held a spray of artificial flowers to her breast. Against the black velvet it gleamed vividly, and Fenton thought that it was similar to the one he had purchased for Stella. To make sure he took his purchase from his pocket and laid it beside his cup, intending to compare it more closely when the girl, who was circumambulating the dance floor as she sang, came near him.

But Fenton never got as far as comparing the two trinkets, for directly the girl approached his table he saw that she was staring in a curious manner at the little silver heron. He watched her face intently. Though she never stopped singing, she paused for a moment by his table. Her dark eyes flickered over his face; one hand crept towards the flowers at her breast. Then she passed on, the song ended, she vanished into the wings of the tiny stage, and the applause died away, to give place to the chatter of voices and the pleasant clattering sound of cups, spoons, and saucers.

Fenton waited. The silver heron had plainly meant something to the girl, and he felt sure that she would communicate with him. Nor was he disappointed, for

within a few minutes he saw her making her way towards him. He rose as she reached his table, but, drawing up a chair, she motioned him to sit down. He did so, aware that her dark eyes were taking in every detail of his features.

"So you have come, then?" she said in a low voice.

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CHAPTER XII

The Society of the Herons

Fenton nodded. "I must admit," he smiled, "that I am here. In face of the indisputable fact that I am sitting here talking with a very charming young lady I have no alternative. I don't think even a lawyer could alter the position, though they can prove most things—if they are paid enough."

The girl's dark eyes searched his face, and she bit her

lip, as if impatient with his raillery.

"Oh, why did you come?" she whispered, and then, without waiting for him to speak, she asked, "Where did you get—this?" Her slim hand moved towards the silver heron which still reposed on the table.

"I bought it," said Fenton innocently. "I observe it

is the same as yours."

"Yes. Have you seen any other people wearing them?" Fenton shook his head. "Then it's lucky for you."

"Please explain," Fenton asked.

"I can't. Not here in the Café." She cast an anxious

look round. "Come to my dressing-room."

She walked towards a curtained door by the side of the stage without waiting to see if Fenton had accepted her invitation. He could only follow, which he did with some eagerness, wondering who this girl could be and what was the significance of the silver herons. A short passage led to a small, square room, which the girl entered. As Fenton followed his eyes swept the apartment, for his suspicions were seldom at rest. In one corner stood a dressing-table littered with the impedimenta of stage make-up, together with brushes, combs,

and bowls of powder. Along one wall hung a number of costumes, but the curtains which ordinarily covered them were pulled back, and not even a dwarf could have been satisfactorily concealed. A wash-hand-stand and three cane-bottomed chairs completed the furnishing.

The girl turned in the centre of the room as Fenton

entered and closed the door behind him.

"You fool!" she cried in a low voice. "Why did you come here? Why could you not remain in Wilno?"

Fenton smiled at her calmly and took out his cigarettecase. "Try one," he advised. "You'll find it soothing to the nerves."

The girl shook her head almost angrily, and her dark eyes blazed. Her hair, black as a raven's wing, was parted on the left side and combed across her head in a series of waves which gleamed in the light when she moved. Her red mouth bore a mutinous expression, like that of a sulky child.

"Supposing," Fenton suggested gently, "you tell me what all this is about, and why you attach so much importance to this?" He tossed the silver heron negli-

gently in the palm of his hand.

"It is the secret badge of the Society of the Herons," she said. Her eyes still watched him, as if trying to gauge the kind of man he was.

"And you are one of them?"

She nodded.

"No wonder the silversmith didn't wish to sell," remarked Fenton. "And why am I foolish to come here? To Ezerenai or the Café?"

"Both," replied the girl, standing straight before him.
"The Herons expected you, and they have planned to kill you."

Fenton raised his eyebrows, and allowed his monocle to drop the length of its cord. "Dear me! How unaccommodating of them! Er—what are they waiting

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for?" He glanced about him, as if expecting to see possible assailants on all sides.

The girl looked at him curiously. "Aren't you

afraid?"

"Afraid?" He put up his monocle and regarded her with a smile. "Not particularly. In fact, I can scarcely believe you. Why should they wish to kill me?"

"Because," the girl answered in a level voice, "you have interfered with their plans, and you may know too

much,"

"Well, they might take the trouble to make certain of

that point," said Fenton in an aggrieved tone.

"They intended to make an end of you before you crossed the frontier, but somehow they must have lost track of you. Even now they are searching for you. And if you remain here, or even in Ezerenai, they will certainly find you, and then——" She shrugged her shoulders.

If there was any truth in what the girl said Fenton thought that he must have dodged his assailants when he inadvertently got lost and spent the night in Old Karas's hut. He remembered the Pole referring to an Englishman who was expected in the neighbourhood. It seemed as if the Society of the Herons were better acquainted with his movements and his motives than he imagined. Had he been wise, he wondered, to trust Catherine Borodoshin? He put the niggling doubt from him, and asked the girl why she, a self-confessed member of the Herons, should take the trouble to warn him.

"Because, though I belong to the Herons, I hate them," she answered frankly. "And I can't bear to be party to a cold-blooded murder."

"If they knew that you had warned me it seems probable that you might find yourself the victim instead of

me," Fenton said.

"I realize that, and I have a suggestion to make. When you go back to Wilno, and you must go at once, take me with you. In return I will tell you all I know about the Herons and their activities."

Fenton blew a contemplative smoke-ring towards the

ceiling. "But I'm not going back to Poland yet."

"But you must!" the girl cried. "To-night some of the Herons will meet here, and probably by then you will have been traced. And if you are found—well, I've told you what will happen. I have heard their plans. It will be a shot or a knife-thrust, whichever is the more convenient."

"For me or them?" grinned Fenton.
The girl stamped her foot. "Are you mad? Don't you understand? It is suicide to remain. You won't have a chance."

"And you?"

"In return for this warning I want you to get me out of Ezerenai. I will answer any questions you like about the Herons. I hate them, but while I am in Ezerenai I must do as they tell me. If I did not-" Again she shrugged her shoulders.

"But if you leave them, what are you going to do?

They may follow you and take their revenge."

The girl sighed. "I hoped that you or the Polish authorities would help me. I am pleading for myself now, but for the next few hours our cause is a common one. Don't you understand?" She came closer to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. "Surely you don't want to be murdered? It is only by chance that you have escaped so far. Even now one of the Herons may have recognized your car, and the hunt for you will have commenced. You must go."

Fenton looked keenly into her upturned face. He had no reason to doubt her, yet his instinct told him to remain in Ezerenai. The girl was betraying those for

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whom she had worked, but such things were by no means unusual, and at least she was not trying to sell information. It seemed that his choice lay between getting her into Poland and using her as a valuable witness, or taking a grave risk by remaining in Ezerenai in order to obtain information which he could not be certain of getting. If he refused the girl's suggestion he might well be throwing away the substance for the shadow, and get hurt into the bargain.

The girl, exasperated by his attitude, shook him fiercely. "Please, please do as I say!" she cried. "Why do you hesitate? Do you think I am trying to trick you? Aren't I taking almost as great a risk as you by telling

you this?"

"How do I know that your information will be of any value?" he retorted. "Exactly how have the Herons

employed you?"

The girl took her hands from his shoulders, and replied steadily, "Chiefly as a messenger from one man to another, and also for carrying payments of money. Several times I have crossed over the frontier into Poland by a little-known route."

"Is it possible to get hold of any documents? Is there a list of the people to whom you have delivered

money?"

"There is, but I cannot get it. Hardt has charge of all papers, but I have a good memory, and I can remember most of the names and where the people are to be found."

"Do you know any Herons on the Polish side of the frontier?"

"Josef Markevicius and Wilenski, who works for

you."

"Anyone else? Any Russian?" asked Fenton, thinking of Malakoff, and also, though he again put the idea out of his mind immediately, of Catherine Borodoshin.

But the girl, though she mentioned four names unknown to Fenton, did not include the Professor or Catherine.

"And what is your name?"

" Marie."

"Have you a passport?"

"What does that matter? We shall not go by the ordinary roads, but by ones where there are no frontier guards. You are going and taking me, aren't you?" she added anxiously. "I really believe you're mad. Why will you not realize the danger? I know what I am

talking about, and you know nothing."

Again Fenton's instinct warned him that the proper course was for him to remain in Ezerenai. Yet by so doing he might lose Marie and her information. The girl might even betray him in order to save her own skin. Also there were Stella and his son Peter to be considered. And it was this which finally decided him.

"What do you propose we should do?" he asked.

Marie's dark eyes lit up. "Then you will follow my advice?" she cried. "Ah, that is better." And she gripped his shoulders in an ecstasy of delight. "Listen. We will fetch your car from the square where you left it, drive to my lodgings, for I must have a few things to take with me, and then we will make for the frontier. By the time we reach it it will be dark, but that is all the better. Wait, I must change my dress."

She slipped out of the black velvet she had been

wearing, revealing a scanty outfit of underwear.

"If she takes a change of that sort she can get it in her handbag," thought Fenton. Aloud he asked,

"When did you plan all this?"

"When I saw you sitting in the Café," replied Marie, walking quite unembarrassed across the room to take a tweed skirt and jumper from the pegs along the wall.

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"I thought I could persuade you, and I decided to take a chance. But I did not think you would prove so obstinate." She smiled at him as she pulled on her jumper. It was a deep red, and matched her dark eyes and black hair "Where's my hat? Oh, there's one thing more."

She opened a drawer in the dressing-table and took out a sheet of paper and an envelope. Quickly she scribbled a few words.

"The man you seek will come here to-night. Watch for him. M."

"That will keep the Herons busy and unsuspicious," she said, as she slipped the note into the envelope, sealed it, and propped it against a hair-brush. "Hardt or Markevicius is bound to come in here this evening. I'm supposed to be singing twice to-night. Well, they will have to find some one else or do without."

She opened the door and looked into the corridor. "Come along. We will go out the back way; it will be safer."

A quarter of an hour later Fenton had extracted his car from the parking-place and, with Marie directing him, was driving towards her lodgings. These were situated in a small house in a mean street, where his car created more interest than he liked to see. He kept a keen look-out, but saw nothing in the least suspicious, and presently Marie appeared with a suitcase, having been absent only about ten minutes. Fenton reflected as he put the case in the back of the coupé that so far as the residents in this particular street were concerned his reputation and Marie's, if she had any, had been blasted for ever.

Under Marie's direction he quickly got clear of Ezerenai, and took a circuitous route towards the frontier. Neither of them spoke very much. Fenton was obliged to concentrate upon his driving, for he was on unfamiliar

roads, and Marie had to watch the route. As they came nearer to the frontier the countryside grew more desolate. At first, while they were within a short distance of Ezerenai, there had been a number of farms and homesteads, but these became fewer as the car progressed. The roads too became worse. Once Marie announced that they had taken a wrong turning, and they were forced to go back a matter of two miles; and when dusk came the road, which had never been more than a muddy cart-track, ceased altogether at a lonely farm, where one dim light burned in a window.

"What do we do now?" asked Fenton.

"Drive straight on. It's fairly level grass, but take care, because there may be marshy patches," Marie said. "We are only about four miles from the frontier now. Look out; there's a ditch here on the left."

"I wonder what the people in that farm-house thought when they heard the car," said Fenton, edging away from

the ditch.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a flash of white teeth as the girl smiled. "Whatever they thought," she replied, "they'll keep to themselves, and if anyone asks them if they heard anything they will swear they did not. It doesn't pay to be inquisitive near the frontier. Can you see a wood on the right?"

"There's one just ahead," said Fenton, peering

through the windscreen.

"Keep to the right of it, then. Not too far, because

the ground slopes down to a swamp."

To Fenton the journey seemed endless, and once when he got on to the soft ground he thought that it had come to an end, but the car ploughed doggedly on, mainly in second gear, and its occupants were jolted about like two stones in a tin can. Gradually Marie picked up the different landmarks, until presently

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she announced that they had almost reached the frontier.

"Won't the guards hear the car?" Fenton asked. The point had been troubling him for some time, for in the silence of the night the engine seemed to roar like that of an aeroplane, and must have been audible for a considerable distance.

"There are none for over a mile either way," Marie answered. "Even if they heard us they could never catch us, for they would have to make detours round swamps to get here. Besides, they don't leave their posts at night, though they do a certain amount of patrolling in the daytime."

She peered through the windscreen and suddenly exclaimed, "Do you see that hill with the four trees on it? Once past that we are in Poland. Keep more to the right."

Slowly the hill approached and slipped astern. Looking back at it through the rear window of the coupé, Marie gave a little gasp of delight and hugged Fenton's arm.

"At last!" she breathed. "Now we can feel reasonably safe."

"Well done!" grinned Fenton, as he stopped the car to light a cigarette and allow the engine to cool. "That

was a pretty good piece of navigation."

As Marie felt for a cigarette in the darkness her fingers touched his, and she gave them a squeeze. "I'm grateful to you for getting me away from those hateful men." Her dark eyes twinkled in the gleam of his lighter. "I haven't felt so cheerful for months."

After a while they continued their journey, with Marie directing as before. "We ought to strike a road before very long," she said.

At length she pointed excitedly to a long line of trees silhouetted against the dim horizon. "Make for them,"

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she said. "Somewhere near there is an empty hut. We can stay there until daylight." She stifled a yawn.

Fenton too was tired with the strain of his drive and welcomed the idea. After a time he stumbled upon a rough pathway, and drove down it until presently a solid, oblong shape loomed up before them.

"There's the hut!" cried Marie. "I only hope we can

get in."

Fenton stopped the car, and they descended stiffly. The latch lifted smoothly, and the door opened. The interior was in darkness.

"Wait a moment," said Fenton. "I've a match some-

where."

He could hear Marie's quick breathing beside him.

Suddenly the brilliant glare of a powerful electric torch shone full in his eyes, blinding him. With a startled cry Marie flung her arms about him.

"Keep quite still, or I shall shoot," said a voice in

Polish out of the darkness.

Fenton could not very well do anything else, for Marie was pinioning his arms to his side. There was a pause, a match scraped somewhere in the blackness of the hut, and in the tiny flame Fenton saw several shadowy figures standing about him. Only when the lamp was lit did he recognize Josef Markevicius and Wilenski. There were two other men, and all of them were armed.

Marie looked over her shoulder, and then slowly dis-

engaged herself. "Hullo, Josef!" she said.

Markevicius took no notice, but with a threatening jerk of his automatic snapped at Fenton, "Put your hands up. At the slightest suspicious movement I shall fire."

Slowly Fenton raised his arms. He glanced at Marie. She was standing to one side, her face expressionless.

"Search him, Konrad," said Markevicius. "I'll keep him covered."

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But Fenton was not armed. He contemplated grappling with Konrad and using him as a shield while he got out of the door, but he saw immediately that such an attempt must fail, for two other pistols covered him from either side in addition to the one held by Markevicius. Konrad settled the matter by kicking the door shut. The tension relaxed slightly. Wilenski and the fourth man, whose name was Slawski, put their weapons on the table.

Fenton was still a trifle dazed by the shock of this unexpected happening, and it was some minutes before he realized that he was back in Old Karas's hut. He had failed to recognize it because he had approached it in darkness from a different direction, and also his powers of observation had been blunted by the strain of his long and arduous drive.

Not until Marie moved to the table and sat on it, swinging one slim leg in a most casual manner, did it dawn upon Fenton that this dark-eyed girl had tricked him hopelessly and completely.

Marie must have seen the expression on his face change, for she smiled triumphantly at him and said, "You fell for it beautifully, didn't you? Just as innocently as a new-born babe." She laughed aloud. "I've seen some simpletons in my time, but you take the prize."

"I congratulate you," said Fenton ruefully, sitting down on the stool which Markevicius indicated with a jerk of his automatic. "You've won hands down all along the course. Even though I don't think I have been very clever, I must admit you played your part to perfection."

Wilenski looked at Fenton with a contemptuous sneer. "A pretty face is quite sufficient to fool him."

"Well, it's a sure thing, Frantisek," Fenton retorted swiftly, "that no one will ever be taken in by yours."

Markevicius and Slawski laughed, but Wilenski scowled, and his eyes glittered malevolently behind their thick lenses.

"Never mind," Fenton went on. "You've finished with the Wilno Consulate, so you can be as rude to me as you like."

"And you've finished with it too, for ever," Wilenski

snapped, showing his teeth in an unpleasant grin.

Fenton put up his monocle and regarded him with grave interest. "I wish you would not indulge in these facial contortions," he remarked. "That last effort

made you look like a ferocious maggot."

Wilenski turned away angrily and began to discuss some matter with his companions, but since they purposely used an argot of which Fenton barely understood one word in seven he gained no information at all. He began to contemplate some method of getting out of the tight corner into which Marie had so successfully led him. If he wished to see Wilno again it was imperative that he should do something soon, for now that Wilenski had so openly declared himself, it was unlikely that Wilno would see either of them any more.

Fenton's thoughts were interrupted by Slawski leaving the hut with Konrad. Markevicius, still covering Fenton with an automatic, and Wilenski remained. Also, of course, the delectable Marie, now seated squarely on the table with her legs crossed facing Fenton. They were nice legs too, he thought. He leaned forward, his forearms resting on his thighs, his hands hanging forlornly down, the picture of dejection. His finger-tips touched the leg of the stool and came away. He glanced round. A little to the side and behind Marie was the lamp. Wilenski had put his pistol on the table. Markevicius was sitting on a stool on Fenton's left. Marie was watching her captive, smiling at him con-

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tentedly and feeling unmistakably pleased with herself.

"Presently," remarked Markevicius, "when Konrad and Slawski return, we will take you for a ride."

"You are not using the phrase in the American sense, I hope," remarked Fenton, with more flippancy than he felt.

Markevicius shook his head. "No; you are going to see an old friend, but you needn't get impatient. Konrad won't be long." He looked at Marie. "That was a very clever ruse of yours. How did you persuade him to leave Ezerenai?"

"Yes, I've been wondering too," said Wilenski.

So Marie enlightened them about her conversation with Fenton in her dressing-room. "But I can assure you," she said, "I got a bad scare when I saw him sitting calmly in the Café. If it had not been for Frantisek's description he might easily have got away with it. As it was, I realized that either he'd given you the slip or that you had lost him, and that something had to be done, and done quickly. The difficulty was to get in touch with you. Fortunately I thought of going to my lodgings to get a suitcase, and I was able to telephone Hardt from there."

Markevicius nodded.

"Yes, he let us know in good time. We waited here for three hours, and we were becoming anxious until we heard the car."

Fenton reflected with some annoyance that he must be suffering from senile decay to have been hoodwinked by a chit of a girl, for Marie had led him by the nose from the start to the finish. The root of the trouble had been that he had had no foundation for any suspicion, although he recollected that his instinct had urged him to remain in Ezerenai. It was actually the thought of Stella and Peter and his responsibility to them that had

decided him to avoid any possible danger, a danger which, as it happened, had been non-existent, except in Marie's fertile imagination. He felt somewhat aggrieved at the irony of the situation. For the first time in his life he had deliberately turned his back upon a risk for the sake of those whom he loved, and he had promptly fallen head first into trouble.

"If we had caught him in Ezerenai," Markevicius continued, "we should have had to get him over the frontier somehow or other." He chuckled. "It was certainly a much better plan to let him drive himself over. You saved us a lot of trouble, Marie."

"And now," said Wilenski with relish, plainly showing his dislike of Fenton in a venomous glance, "we will put him where he can cause us none."

Marie flicked the ash from her cigarette. "What shall

we do with his car?"

"Take it with us," answered Markevicius. "If we leave it here it might give some inquisitive person a clue."

"I was thinking," said Wilenski slowly, "that his disappearance and mine, coming on top of the Urquhart affair, will cause a considerable stir."

Markevicius shrugged his shoulders. "That cannot be avoided. Anyway, we've only obeyed orders. In the circumstances we could not have acted otherwise. Our despondent friend here was getting too dangerous to be allowed to continue his investigations. In any case our plans are so far advanced that by the time the authorities discover anything tangible it will be too late."

The "despondent friend," still sitting on his stool with bent head, pricked up his ears. From Markevicius's words it seemed that the plans of the Society of the Herons were likely to mature soon. Fenton raised his head. His captors had grown so interested in their conversation that they had become careless. Possibly also

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they were deceived by their prisoner's dejected attitude. If he were to attempt an escape he must make his effort before Konrad and Slawski returned and increased the already considerable odds. Wilenski was pacing up and down, out of immediate reach of the pistol which he had put on the table, and Markevicius had allowed the muzzle of his weapon to drop until it no longer covered Fenton. Wilenski paused in his walk and turned to the window to peer into the darkness for Konrad and Slawski. Fenton tensed his muscles, and his fingers, dangling between his thighs, sought the leg of the stool on which he sat. Only Marie, perched on the table opposite, saw the movement. She opened her mouth, and a look of apprehension came into her eyes.

But before she could speak Fenton twitched the stool from beneath him and sent it hurtling towards Markevicius. It struck him full in the face, knocking him backward. Automatically his finger pulled the trigger of the automatic, but, though the noise of the report was tremendous, because of the confined space, the bullet passed harmlessly through the roof. Marie screamed, but remained sitting on the table, helpless with alarm.

The same spring which had taken Fenton off his stool sent him across the room towards Wilenski, who had wheeled from the window towards his weapon. Fenton's left fist, impelled with every ounce of his weight and strength and all his dislike, took Wilenski on the mouth and sent him spinning into the wall, whence he slid unconscious to the floor. Fenton had never hit anyone with so much relish as he had hit Wilenski. The instant after the blow had landed Fenton turned, caught the edge of the table, and heaved. He had a momentary glimpse of Marie's attractive legs pointing towards the roof as she, the table, and the lamp crashed to the floor. Fortunately the flame was extinguished by the fall, and the oil did not catch fire.

Stooping low in the darkness, Fenton made for the door. There was a thunderous report as Markevicius, guessing Fenton's intentions, fired in that direction, but the bullet went high and embedded itself in the log wall. The next second Fenton had the door open and almost fell out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII

You've Treated Lawrie as if He Were the Under-gardener

On the third day after Fenton had left Wilno Catherine rose early and, putting on a kimono, hastened to the front door. But there was no envelope lying on the threshold, as she had hoped, and her heart seemed to miss a beat. This was the last day of the time-limit given by Fenton, and she had been confident that he would write to assure her that all was well. As she returned to her bedroom to dress she tried to console herself with the thought that after all there were other postal deliveries, there was also the telephone, and there

were even special messengers.

The day dragged slowly past. Catherine was alone in the flat, for she had given her maid a holiday, and she tried to occupy herself by embarking upon a thorough cleaning of the lounge. But within an hour she abandoned the attempt and tried to write an article upon the changing conditions in the life of the peasantry. Six sheets of paper went into the waste-paper basket and as many cigarettes were consumed before she gave it up. Indeed, she had felt from the start that the effort was bound to fail, for she could not concentrate. All the time she was listening for a summons either from the front door or the telephone. She dared not go out, for she was certain that if she did a message would arrive in her absence. It was one of the longest days she could remember, and when midnight struck and Fenton had failed to communicate with her she felt as if her little world had fallen to pieces.

The following morning, with a heavy heart and a

mind full of foreboding, she proceeded to carry out Fenton's instructions. Even when she approached the telephone, however, she paused, hoping against hope that some message would come through at the last moment. But there was no sound from the bell, and with a feeling of intense anxiety she lifted the receiver and called the Warsaw number 40961.

But Gustav Kovel, for whom she asked, was not there.

"Who is speaking?" came the question.

"I am speaking for Mr Lawrie Fenton, the British Vice-Consul at Wilno," replied Catherine. "Will you take down this statement and forward it to Mr Kovel as soon as possible. It is vitally important. Indeed," her voice shook, "it may be a matter of life and death."

The speaker at the other end of the line seemed quite unmoved by the urgency of her tone. "Very well," he said calmly; "I am quite ready to take down your statement, but first I must know who is speaking for Mr Fenton and from where."

"It is Catherine Borodoshin, speaking from her flat in Wilno." She added the address.

The pause which followed her announcement sounded ominous to Catherine, but after a moment the voice said,

"Begin, please, and speak distinctly."

Thereupon Catherine repeated the facts which Fenton had told her, and explained the circumstances in which she was to pass them on to Gustav Kovel. When the narrative was complete she replaced the receiver and stared at it miserably. Until she had delivered that message she had thought it quite possible that Fenton would communicate with her in some way, but when the matter-of-fact voice in Warsaw had said "Good-bye" she sensed that once more she was engulfed in hopeless mystery.

She lit a cigarette, although she had smoked so many in the last forty-eight hours that it tasted unpleasantly

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bitter. Well, she had carried out her instructions, and there was nothing more to be done except wait. She wondered drearily what would happen. Fenton had attached considerable importance to the delivery of that message, but he had not asked her to do anything else. Suddenly she thought of his wife and child. He had told her a little about them on the night when she had confessed that Martin was her lover. Surely Mrs Fenton ought to know that her husband——

Catherine dared not contemplate the thought, but, going to her desk, she wrote, after considerable cogitation, a guarded letter to Stella. It was not an easy letter to write, but when she had completed it she felt better. Possibly it was the morbid realization that another woman besides herself was in dire trouble. Not until she had sealed the letter in an envelope did she remember that she had no idea of Fenton's address in England. However, that could soon be remedied. She put on her things and walked quietly to the British Vice-Consulate.

Scarcely able to conceal her agitation, she inquired of

Helen Lenk if Mr Fenton was in.

"No," replied Helen, recognizing Catherine, "nor is Mr Wilenski. But Mr Carson is in charge. Do you wish to see him?"

Catherine shook her head. "Do you know when Mr Fenton will be back?" There was a faint hope in her mind that perhaps the Consulate would know something of which she was ignorant, or perhaps had had some news during the last few hours. But her hopes faded when Helen spoke.

"I'm afraid not. He did not say how long he would

be away."

"You see," Catherine explained, "I wanted the address of his wife." She showed Helen her letter with the brief superscription "Mrs Fenton."

"If you like to leave the letter with me I will see that

it is correctly addressed," replied the discreet Helen, though she knew Stella's address well enough, because of the numerous letters she had posted for Fenton.

Catherine entrusted the missive to her, and hurried through the streets back to her flat, fearful that in her brief absence some message might have arrived from Fenton. In her haste and agitation she took no particular notice of a saloon car drawn up a little farther along the narrow street, but as she approached her flat three policemen emerged from the entrance.

"Catherine Borodoshin?" inquired their spokesman. Catherine, to whom the police had always been a shadowy menace, faced them squarely. "Yes. What do

you want?"

"I have orders to arrest you, so that you may be interrogated and your movements inquired into. Will you accompany me to that car?" The policeman indicated the waiting saloon.

Catherine shrugged her shoulders. "Very well; but I

warn you that you are wasting your time."

"That remains to be seen," retorted the policeman.

With a firm grasp of her arm he escorted her to the car. She got in and, with a policeman sitting on each side of her, was driven away. Was this, she wondered, the result of her telephone message to Gustav Kovel?

Helen Lenk was as good as her word, and Catherine's letter was duly dispatched to England. It was delivered at Fenton's house in the country by the afternoon post just at the time when Stella was busy with Peter. The Nannie whom Fenton so cordially loathed had given notice. Her dictatorial methods had at last proved too much for Stella, who had put her small foot down firmly and emphatically, with the result that Nannie was now seeking pastures new. Stella had had the management of Peter for ten whole days, and was already contemplating the necessity of securing the services of another

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nurse. Master Peter was a larger handful than she had hitherto realized.

Stella was engaged in her evening duties of bathing her son, giving him his supper, and putting him to bed in the hope that she would hear no more from him until the following morning. She recognized the postman's knock, and when presently the maid arrived with the letter on a silver tray she noticed, as she put it on the nursery mantelpiece, that it bore a Polish stamp. She did not even glance at the handwriting, for the stamp alone suggested that it was one of her husband's letters.

That evening young Peter suffered from indigestion, and it was some time before he fell asleep. Stella, again regretting the absence of a nurse, went downstairs to a belated supper, and it was not until afterwards that she remembered the letter on the nursery mantelpiece. Cigarette in mouth, she returned to the nursery, and it was only as she took the square pale blue envelope from the shelf that she realized that the address was written in two kinds of handwriting. Both, she noticed instinctively, bore feminine characteristics.

With a sudden feeling of apprehension, leavened with natural curiosity, she ripped open the letter. As her eyes travelled swiftly down the sheets the curiosity vanished, to be replaced by a stunned bewilderment. Catherine had written in an extremely guarded manner, but she had conveyed the information that Fenton had been missing for three days, and that she, Catherine, was anxious, for it was obvious from his manner before he left Wilno that he had foreseen such a possibility. She concluded with the hope that there was probably some quite normal explanation, but that she had taken the responsibility of telling Stella of the undeniably peculiar state of affairs.

Stella, who had almost disregarded the existence of

her husband during the past six months or so, was filled with acute alarm. Had Lawrie said anything in his letters which might give some clue to his absence? She could not remember, and admitted to herself that the reason was because she had not bothered to read them very carefully. She went through the letter again, and then stared at it, a confusion of thought flooding her mind, until the cigarette burned her fingers. The pain had the effect of jolting her senses into gear again. What could be done? Immediately her thoughts flew to Sir George Fawley. He, if anybody, should be able to help.

After a peep at the now peacefully sleeping Peter she hurried downstairs to the telephone. A glance at the clock showed that the time was a few minutes past nine. Unless Sir George was working late he ought to be at his private house. But disappointment awaited Stella. Sir George, Knapp, the butler, informed her, was dining out,

and was not expected back for an hour at least.

Stella bit her lip. "Will you ask him to ring me directly he comes in? It's very important."

"Very good, madam," replied Knapp, to whom Stella

was well known. "I will see that he does so."

The next two hours dragged interminably. Stella was restless and agitated. The maid and the cook went to bed, and the house became silent. A nightingale in the copse a hundred yards away began its first few hesitant notes before bursting into full song. For the first time since Fenton had gone to Poland Stella felt intolerably lonely. Repeatedly she told herself that there was nothing about which to be alarmed, but these personal assurances did little to soothe her. She fetched Lawrie's letters and read the last three or four. In none of them did she find anything to indicate that he expected to be away from Wilno. For the sixth time she went through Catherine's letter. In her attempt to be discreet Catherine had only made her words read mysteriously. Stella

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had no idea who Catherine Borodoshin might be, for Fenton had never mentioned in his letters anything which might have any connexion with the Urquhart affair.

Stella, besides being anxious, became a trifle annoyed. With a wife and child to provide for, she did consider Lawrie had no right to become embroiled in anything to which a risk was attached. There was no excuse for Lawrie to go gallivanting about Europe. Stella had sufficient experience of her husband to be aware that adventure of any kind had always attracted him. Who was this Catherine person? She seemed to know a good deal about Lawrie's movements. Stella felt a tiny twinge of jealousy.

But that phase did not last long, and it was a very worried and anxious woman who flew to the telephone shortly after half-past eleven. She explained her anxiety and Catherine's letter, and concluded with an impassioned plea to be told what had happened to Lawrie.

Sir George, more than thankful that fifty miles of telephone wire lay between them, reassured her, and his matter-of-fact tone had a calming effect. But it had been a shock to him to learn that Catherine Borodoshin was concerned in the matter. "So far as I know," he said, "nothing has happened to him. He's probably taken a holiday. Gone shooting, I expect, and maybe he's got hung up in some out-of-the-way district by floods, or something like that. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Don't distress yourself, my dear."

"But why should this woman write to me?" cried

"Who can understand the reasoning of a woman's mind?" chuckled Sir George. "She admits that she wrote on her own responsibility. Lawrie did not ask her to communicate with you."

"That's so," Stella admitted; "but she said he foresaw

the possibility of his not returning." Stella's voice shook. There was an unpleasant hint of finality about those last words.

"Exactly, and for the very reason, or something similar, that I have just given. You are worrying yourself quite needlessly, Stella. However," Sir George added, "to ease your mind I will have inquiries made and let you know."

"You'll find out something about this woman too?"

"Oh, yes." Sir George smiled faintly. "I'll ask about her. I'll ring you up to-morrow."

"Will you come down to lunch?" asked Stella. "Then

we can talk it over."

"Well-" began Sir George hesitatingly.

"Do," Stella pleaded. "I've not seen anyone for a long

time, and it seems very lonely down here."

"Very well, my déar; I'll be down at one o'clock. Good night. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. Give my love to Peter."

Sir George pushed away the telephone, took off his pince-nez, and began to polish them slowly. At length he replaced them, poured himself out a whisky and soda,

and rang for the butler.

"Knapp, to-morrow I shall have—er—um—gout; no, that's no good; it means sympathetic visitors. Laryngitis, and probably influenza; that will keep people away; nor shall I be able to talk on the telephone. Yes, I shall have acute laryngitis, Knapp. So about 10.30 you will 'phone my apologies to the Marquess of Cholesey, and say that I am in bed and all the rest of it, and therefore cannot lunch with him."

"Very good, sir," replied Knapp impassively.

"And warn the chauffeur I shall want him and the Rolls at 11.15."

"Yes, sir."

"That's all, I think. Are there any sandwiches? Oh,

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over there. Good. Don't wait up, Knapp. I shall be late, I expect. Good night."

Sir George pulled an armchair up to the telephone, put the sandwiches and the whisky and soda within reach, together with a cigar and the evening paper, and sat down with a sigh. Presently he put a call through to Warsaw, and while waiting for the connexion to be made he glanced at the *Evening Post*. According to that informative journal, Europe appeared likely to be engaged in war at any moment. Sir George remained unperturbed. He knew far more about the international situation than any of the imaginative journalists who strove to maintain an impressive circulation by inventing crises twice a week. When Warsaw was announced he asked for 40061.

That was not the only call Sir George made that night, and in several instances blasphemous gentlemen were fetched from their beds to speak with him. Finally at half-past one he pushed the telephone aside and slowly ate the last sandwich. Then he sat for a long time, thinking. Finally, with a sigh, he shrugged his shoulders and began to switch out the lights.

"I hope I have got laryngitis in the morning," he murmured. "Only Stella would think I was funking it."

Stella spent a bad night, for, besides being anxious about her husband, she was suffering from the prickings of her conscience. However, towards morning she fell into a deep sleep, and when she awoke much of her anxiety had gone. Perhaps the warm sunshine flooding into the room and the song of the birds in the trees on the opposite side of the lane helped to allay her fears. When Sir George's Rolls drew up she ran down to the gate to meet him.

"Is there any news?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing very much," said Sir George, regarding her smilingly and patting her cheek in the avuncular manner he invariably adopted. "Certainly there's nothing for

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you to worry about." He noted with concern the dark smudges under her eyes.

"Oh, I am so glad!" cried Stella, and then added anxiously, "You do mean that? Is Lawrie all right?"

"So far as I can make out he is."

Sir George followed her into the lounge. "Ah, there's my godchild!" he cried, catching sight of Peter. "Gad, how he grows! And he's getting rid of that Mongolian look."

"Don't be beastly! How dare you suggest any child of mine is Mongolian!"

"I don't, my dear, but all young babies have a certain Mongolian cast of feature. Fortunately it wears off."

Stella, however, was not to be sidetracked so easily, and over lunch she returned to the attack. Sir George fenced as well as he could, but Stella, her woman's instinct warning her that he was concealing something, pressed him all the harder.

"There's no question of Lawrie having disappeared," he protested, and had sufficient effrontery to look his hostess in the face. "His departure was quite premeditated, and a man was sent from Warsaw to relieve him. It is merely a question of going on leave."

But the guarded contents of Catherine's letter and all her own fears came flooding back into Stella's mind. "Why does he have leave when he's only been there a few weeks?" she asked, seizing upon the weak point in Sir George's argument.

Her guest shrugged his shoulders. "Presumably

because he wanted it."

"Then," retorted Stella, her blue eyes fixed unwaveringly upon him, "if he's on leave, if a relief has been sent from Warsaw, why does this Catherine person become alarmed because she doesn't hear from him for three days?"

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"You've only her word for it," said Sir George, feeling, however, that it was a poor retort.

"Who is this woman?"

Sir George explained that she was a journalist living in Wilno.

"Do you honestly believe that Lawrie is in no

danger? "

"I do," said Sir George quietly, and no bishop could have affirmed his faith with more sincerity, nor would one have added beneath his breath, "God forgive me!" as did Sir George. "Of course," he went on, "if there is any further news I'll let you know at once."

"I do think," said Stella presently in an aggrieved tone, "that if Lawrie was going on leave like this he

might have mentioned it in his letters."

"So do I, and I should jolly well write and tell him

so," Sir George agreed heartily.

He remained to tea, for he saw that Stella was glad of his company. But undoubtedly she was lonely. An idea came into his head, and after a while he said casually, "Oh, by the way, Stella, Odette wished me to inquire if you could put up with her presence for a few days. I don't know what Ronnie has on hand, but I gather he's going to make her a grass widow for a time."

"Of course! I'd be delighted," said Stella. "When does she want to come?"

"As soon as possible, I believe. I'll get her to give you a ring. And now I must go, but I'll take a look at Peter first."

Lawrie's offspring was in the nursery under the supervision of the maid, and after a few minutes of those peculiar diversions which appear to please the infant mind Sir George was about to leave when he saw the stuffed resemblance of a heron, with a yellow body and legs and red wings, which Peter had cast upon the floor.

He stooped and picked it up. "That's a weird bird," he remarked.

"Yes, I think Lawrie sent it," said Stella.

"From Wilno?" said Sir George casually.

"I don't know. I should say it had been packed at the

shop. There was no message or anything."

"And you didn't notice the stamp? Well, well, it's a magnificent bird; a heron, I should say. And now, young Peter, here you are. Smooth its feathers down, fold up it legs, and don't forget to feed it on canary seed." He restored the heron to its rightful owner and took his de-

parture.

Stella had found him both encouraging and comforting, but soon after he had gone her anxiety returned with renewed force. Was he concealing something from her? Why did Odette want to come and stay, and where was Ronnie going? Had his forthcoming absence anything to do with Lawrie? Had Sir George been unduly impressed by the toy heron? Why did he ask if it had come from Wilno? Was it likely to have come from any other place?

These questions and many others flowed endlessly through Stella's mind, and to none of them could she supply an answer. Nor would she have been other than perturbed had she known that Sir George had stopped his Rolls at the first telephone-box and rung up his

daughter-in-law.

"Listen, Odette," he said, "I want you to do me a favour, even if it's inconvenient."

"O.K., Pops," replied Odette flippantly. "Shoot. I can bear it."

"If Stella rings up you're to say that it's quite correct that you want to stay with her while Ronnie's away. It's an errand of mercy really. She's got the jumps."

"What's wrong? Peter got the wind, or has Lawrie

fallen for a brunette?"

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"Neither. Come to dinner, and I'll explain. But I had to warn you, because I gave Stella the impression that you asked me to ask her if you could go."

"And did she? I mean, I suppose you know what you're talking about? Righto! I'll see you at seven, Pops,

and don't forget I like two cherries in mine."

Odette Fawley arrived at Stella's house the next day, prepared to cheer up her hostess and generally make herself useful. But she found that during the few hours which had elapsed since her father-in-law's departure Stella's fears had increased to such an extent that she would hardly listen to any of the reasonable arguments with which Sir George had been careful to prime Odette without telling her too much.

Odette stood it well enough for three days, but, being, behind her usually facetious attitude, a sensible young woman, she realized that her sympathy was being wasted, inasmuch as it was only making Stella worse. Unless some other course was adopted Stella would become a victim of nerves. Odette contemplated the situation, and decided that mere reasoning was not enough to alter Stella's viewpoint. Some more drastic method was required.

Casting around in her mind, Odette recollected how she and Ronnie, to say nothing of her wily father-in-law, had noticed that the unfortunate Lawrie had gradually been pushed into the background since the birth of his son. Odette, who was a forthright young person, had often been on the verge of remonstrating with Stella. Now it occurred to her that past events might prove uncommonly useful. And so on the next occasion that Stella began to worry audibly about her husband she received a shock.

"It's all very well for you to moan," said Odette, "but have you considered poor old Lawrie?"

"What d'you mean?" Stella demanded indignantly. "I am so worried about him I can't sleep."

"Oh, I don't mean now." Odette cocked one slim leg over the other as she lay back in an armchair. "Of course you're worried now, because you imagine something has gone wrong. I mean during the past few months."

"I don't understand." Stella was genuinely puzzled.
"I'll explain," Odette said deliberately. "Then I'll be able to get rid of a few home-truths that have been locked up in my beautiful bosom so long that they've given me mental indigestion. Probably you'll chuck me out of the house and never speak to me again. However, I'll risk that. You did me a good turn once, and gave me a husband.¹ Try to remember, when you feel the urge to gouge my eyes out, that I'm doing you a good turn now."

Odette tilted up her chin and blew a perfect smoke-

ring.

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you that since you produced that horrible little brat upstairs, of whom I happen to be very fond, you've gradually pushed Lawrie

into the background of your life?"

"No, it hasn't. I'm naturally anxious about Peter, but I've shared everything with Lawrie. I've not neglected him in any way, and we've never quarrelled. I dare say, in fact, I'm certain, that he is just as fond of the boy as

I am. After all, he's his father."

"Well, you ought to know," retorted Odette, not being able to resist the riposte. "I don't suppose you have quarrelled—I'd say it was damned hard to quarrel with Lawrie—but young Peter has always been your first consideration. He's ruled this blessed house through you until no one else has a say in the matter. Lawrie's felt that he has been in the way, that he's gained a son and lost a girl who was a jolly good companion—and in marriage, my lass, that is something more valuable than being a mere wife."

¹ See the author's Spies in the Web.

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"You're talking nonsense!" cried Stella.

"I'm talking horse-sense. I'll bet poor old Lawrie felt damn' glad in a way that he was going to Wilno. Oh, he never said anything to me; he's too loyal. But I've seen, well, little things a woman does notice, and very often Lawrie's been hurt by the way you've behaved and spoken to him about Peter. I've thought a lot, but until now I've not said anything."

Stella was looking at her in amazement. "I suppose you're not in love with Lawrie by any chance, are you?"

she asked.

"I don't know whether it's possible for a woman to love two men," retorted Odette calmly, "but if it is I am. You see, I'm not forgetting that if it hadn't been for Lawrie Ronnie wouldn't be here. Nor would you," she added bluntly, and Stella went a shade paler.

"I'm not going to sit down any longer," Odette continued, "and see young Peter act as a wedge and force

apart two people I care for."

"You've a curious way of showing your affection,"

remarked Stella coldly.

"That's because you don't see my point of view. Stella, to put it bluntly, you've made a b.f. of yourself over that kid. Children are all right, but they shouldn't be allowed to rule the roost completely. You go through a lot for them, and they take up the best part of your life in any case. I've not got any, so I can speak without bias," she added.

"Or experience," said Stella bitingly.

"But with a sense of proportion," was the swift retort.

"During the last few months you've treated Lawrie as if he were the under-gardener, and because he loves both of you he's taken it all without a murmur. And now, when you think something has happened to him, you suddenly wake up to the fact that you may have lost something valuable. Well, that's quite correct. You can have a hell

of a lot of kids like Peter, but you can only have one Lawrie. But even now you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. You are behaving like a spoilt child—as if you yourself are the aggrieved person. All this agitation and perturbation is because you are upset. It is not poor old Lawrie you're thinking about so much as the fact that you've been worried because he's been so inconsiderate as not to write and tell you he was going on leave."

"I think you're being perfectly beastly!" cried Stella.

"Maybe I am, but for once in a way you're hearing a few home-truths. I've stuck your damned snivelling for three days, and if you were genuinely upset about Lawrie I wouldn't mind. Just you remember what he's had to put up with for the past half-year or more. How the hell I've managed to keep quiet all this time I don't know, for I saw Lawrie getting more unhappy every week, and you behaving like a damned priggish little virgin at a garden party in aid of fallen women!"

Stella suddenly went very white, and without a word swept from the lounge. Odette heard her going upstairs

to her room.

"Oh, blast!" she muttered. "I suppose that's just about torn it? And I was sent down here to comfort her! Pops'll be hellish annoyed." She flung her cigarette-end moodily into the empty grate. "Odette, my infant," she soliloquized, "you let your affection for Lawrie take you beyond the bounds of legitimate criticism. I'll give her half an hour, then I'll go and apologize, and that's going to take some doing. I'll have to eat humble pie as a punishment for letting my feelings run away with me."

She got up and, standing on tiptoe, for she was not very tall, looked at herself in the glass above the mantelpiece. Her pale oval face was rather flushed, and her As if He Were the Under-gardener dark eyes, usually so full of vitality, were somewhat

"She probably won't speak to me again, Pops will think I'm a fool, Ronnie will be furious, and I shan't have done Lawrie any good. Oh, hell and damnation!" she said ruefully, and a second later added, "Why do I always swear when I'm all wrought up?"

subdued.

CHAPTER XIV

You Are My Last Hope, Alphonse

ODETTE finished her second cigarette and was about to go upstairs to make peace when Stella entered the lounge, her face pale and rather set. It was obvious that she had been crying.

"This," thought Odette, "is where I am asked to leave the house. I wonder what time the next train to Town leaves, and if I shall have to walk the two miles

to the station?"

But to Odette's astonishment Stella came straight up and kissed her. "Thanks, Odette. You were quite right. I'm afraid that the arrival of Peter was an event which destroyed my sense of proportion. It is quite true that I have been thinking too much of him, and have been neglecting Lawrie."

"My dear!" Odette almost gasped.

"You see," Stella went on in a quiet voice, absently taking a cigarette from a silver box on the mantelpiece, "it was I who really made Lawrie hunt round for a job. If it hadn't been for me all this would never have happened. It was my selfishness that made him go to Poland, and now he's in trouble, and——"

"You don't know that," Odette interrupted quickly.
"I've got an uncomfortable feeling about it." Stella lit her cigarette thoughtfully. "I made him go to Wilno, so that he could earn money for Peter's education. As if that mattered, really. I've been selfish and pigheaded, and the poor old fellow has never murmured. And all I've done lately is to moan because he hasn't written to me."

Odette, who could have danced round the lounge with

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joy at the effect of her words, said apologetically, "I'm afraid I was a bit blunt, Stella."

Stella smiled and shook her head. "Never mind. It was what I wanted. You have made me see sense. As Lawrie would have said, what I wanted was a hefty kick in the pants, and you gave it to me verbally."

Odette slipped an arm round her friend's waist. "I believe I am right, darling. Lawrie's in no trouble, really. It just happens that he has not written be-

cause——"

"You're trying to be comforting," Stella broke in gravely. "I think Sir George knows more than he's told

me, and to-morrow I'm going to find out."

She telephoned to Sir George that evening, and arranged to lunch with him the following day. The old gentleman would have liked to put her off, but he dare not even make the attempt, lest Stella should think he was trying to conceal bad news. So he made the best of a bad job and took her to a quiet little place where the cooking and food were so excellent that it was not necessary to distract the minds of the customers with music.

Sir George regarded his guest affectionately across the table. Stella made an attractive picture, and somehow she seemed to get more out of her clothes than most women. Others might be dressed more expensively and utilize the services of more exclusive shops, but in Sir George's opinion they quite failed to approach Stella. He enjoyed the sheen of her fair hair where it peeped from beneath her hat, the delightful curve of her mouth, which, as a sop to fashion, she had touched with lipstick, though in truth it needed none. He noted with a feeling of thankfulness that she had not tinted her finger-nails; of all modern habits he regarded that as the most revolting. But, with some misgiving, he realized that the blue eyes which steadily returned his scrutiny were not twinkling as happily as usual. Once

more he wished he had had the courage to put Stella off.

"How is my godson?" he asked, after he had complimented Stella on her appearance.

"I left him sleeping peacefully," Stella replied, "with Odette hoping that he won't wake up till I return."

"A vain hope, I should imagine." Sir George chuckled. "How's Odette?"

"Very well, apart from apprehensions with regard to Peter. She did me a good turn yesterday. She made me see what a beast I have been to Lawrie." Stella raised her eyes and looked at Sir George squarely. know I've not heard from him yet?"

Sir George was uncertain whether the sentence was a statement or a question. "Oh, it's nothing to get

anxious about," he temporized.

He felt acutely uncomfortable under Stella's steady scrutiny. With all his experience of keeping secrets and not answering awkward questions, he found it difficult, if not impossible, to dissimulate with Stella. Probably it was the effect of the personal factor; had she been a stranger his task would have been comparatively easy.

"And have you learned anything about the woman

who wrote to me?" she asked.

"Catherine Borodoshin? It's rather curious that she also cannot be found. She called at the Consulate and left that letter to be forwarded to you, and has not been seen since."

Stella felt a slight twinge of jealousy, which grew quickly to something very like panic. Had she realized the folly of her behaviour too late? Did this woman mean anything to Lawrie?

Sir George seemed to read her thoughts, for he added, "I don't believe there's anything significant in that, no connexion between the two facts. Catherine Borodoshin

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did not disappear until four days after Lawrie had left Wilno. I don't want you to magnify this affair too much, Stella."

"I wish I could be sure," replied Stella quietly. "In a way I feel responsible. If I hadn't been so selfish and so preoccupied with Peter Lawrie would never have

gone to Wilno."

Sir George's uneasiness increased. So far as Fenton's appointment was concerned, his own conscience was not quite spotless, and the argument that he was only carrying out his duty to the best of his ability had lost most of its strength during the last few days.

"However," Stella added, "Odette soon knocked

some sense into me."

Sir George seized on the proffered diversion gratefully. "She's just the sort to do it," he chuckled. "I remember the occasion before she and Ronnie were married when she gave me a dressing-down."

"I was there," smiled Stella. "Her English wasn't as good as it is now, but she smacked the face of your footman, called you a silly old man, and swore to make

you eat 'the small pie.'"

"She also demanded to know if I considered her to be 'the tart what comes with the baby in the shawl.' Yes, that was a lively ten minutes. I thought she was going to smack my face too."

But Stella quickly returned to the subject of her

husband.

"From whom have you got your information about Lawrie?" she asked.

"Is that a fair question?" Sir George hedged.

"I think so. You aren't going to plead official secrecy, are you? After all, I can retort with special privilege; it's my husband who is concerned. And you know me well enough to trust me."

"I suppose you're right," the old man sighed. "I've

been in communication with Gustav Kovel. The affair couldn't be in better hands. After all, he's Lawrie's friend," Sir George added.

Stella nodded, and for a few moments remained deep

in thought.

Sir George wondered what was coming next, but he

was quite unprepared for Stella's pronouncement.

"Well," she said at length, as if after some hesitation she had reached a decision of importance, "Odette has done me one good turn; now she can do me another. She can look after Peter while I go to Wilno. I've not met Gustav for a long time."

Sir George stared at her, and his white eyebrows went

up with a jerk.

"To Wilno!" he repeated.

Stella nodded. "Yes. I can't remain inactive here. If I can get in touch with Gustav I shall feel happier, and at least I shall be nearer to Lawrie."

"Do you think it wise?" Sir George had almost said 'safe,' but he managed to check himself in time, for he had no wish to add to Stella's apprehension.

"Why not?"

"I should have thought it better for you to remain in

England."

"In what way?" Stella retorted swiftly. "Don't forget that I was born in Poland, so I shall not be going into a strange land. Besides, as you know, I've had some experience in this kind of work. Gustav will know that, and probably he'll be able to make use of me. Anything is better than this dreadful suspense. I can't, I simply can't, remain here doing nothing, dreading the arrival of the postman and the sound of the telephone."

Although she strove to disguise it, Sir George was aware of the note of acute distress in Stella's voice. But there was also a hint of inflexible determination,

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and, since he had not known Stella for a number of years without acquiring a pretty accurate idea of her character, he realized that arguments would be quite useless once she had made up her mind.

"Well," he said, with a resigned shrug of his shoulders, "I've no authority to stop you. If you think you are doing the right thing I suppose you had better go.

I'm glad Kovel will be there."

" Why?"

"Oh," replied Sir George, "he will keep you out of mischief."

Stella smiled. She had anticipated a more formidable resistance to her plan. Sir George had been as discreet and secretive as he could be in the circumstances, but sometimes almost as much may be learned by information being withheld as by answering questions. Stella was certain that Sir George had not told her everything, and that could only mean that he wished to spare her pain and anxiety.

When Stella returned from her lunch with Sir George and announced that she was going to Wilno Odette was amazed. "But, Stella," she cried, "what are you going

to do with Peter?"

"Trespass upon your good nature and leave him in

your care," said Stella.

Odette's amazement changed to horror. "But I couldn't look after him! I've never had anything to do with children. I don't even know what the little beasts eat."

"I'll leave you full instructions," said Stella, with an amused smile. "As for not having had any experience, why, that's nothing! Remember there's a mother's instinct in every woman. Yours only needs rousing. Besides, once you and Ronnie start you'll probably run into double figures, so you'd better begin getting your hand in."

Odette regarded her ruefully.

"If I'd known this was going to happen I'd have kept

quiet."

"But I know you'll help, darling," coaxed Stella. "You see, this is what comes of putting your spoon in other people's porridge."

Odette responded with a hug and a chuckle. "It'll be fun to see Ronnie's face when I tell him he'll probably have to walk the bedroom floor at night nursing

some one else's howling offspring!"

The following day Stella left by air for Poland, travelling in her maiden name of Polowski, and blessing the circumstance that her old, original passport was not yet out of date. Sir George knew nothing of this, nor, indeed, did Stella tell him she was leaving so soon. She realized that he disapproved of her project, and she was taking no risks. It would, she knew, be quite easy for him to make passport difficulties at the air-port, so she slipped away without a word to anyone except Odette, who was already quite sufficiently harassed by the responsibilities of a foster-mother.

Stella did not go straight to Wilno, but to Warsaw. It was some years before in this city that she had first made the acquaintance of her husband. She had also made other and rather curious friends who had a peculiar knowledge of the subterranean currents that beset Poland, which is not, perhaps, quite the peaceful country that it seems to be on the surface. She hoped to pick up the threads which had woven the pattern of her life before she had married, and if she was successful she believed the results would surprise both Sir George Fawley and Gustav Kovel.

She booked a room in a modest hotel, and began to tour the haunts of the acquaintances whom she sought. In every case she drew blank. Either they had left the

1 See the author's Room 14.

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city or they were dead, or they had just 'disappeared,' a euphemistic term which might mean anything from an unobtrusive moonlight flitting from creditors to a sudden and sanguinary death. Three days of intensive searching left her with only two inquiries to make, and both of these she had left to the end, because she did not wish to call upon the assistance of these two people if she could help it. However, she was now without any alternatives, and one night she made her way to that unsalubrious district in which stood the Blue Toad Café.

How quickly old memories came flocking back! The same road, narrow and badly illuminated, the same unpleasant odour of rotting vegetable refuse. There stood the small house, shrinking back from two better-built neighbours as if it was ashamed of itself, as, indeed, it might well be, for its reputation had not been of the best. Stella observed that an attempt had been made to renovate it, and that it was no longer known as the Blue Toad, but had been renamed the Sickle Moon. The old creaking wooden door which led into the main room of the café had been replaced with one of which the top half was glass.

Stella peeped in. Apart from a few splashes of paint, the interior had not changed. There were the same unclean marble-topped tables, with the same type of occupants—painted women with thin, hard faces and anxious, avaricious eyes and dissolute, lecherous-looking men. An orchestra of three played on a platform; at the back was the door through which Lawrie had dragged her from a fighting, cursing mob, with her clothes ripped half off her back. The one innovation was the installation of a pay-desk, presided over by a stout woman in a tightly fitting black frock cut low in the bosom.

Stella pushed open the door a few inches and N 193

beckoned her. She was not going to enter the café if she could avoid it. Quite aware that she possessed more than ordinary good looks, she knew full well that to enter the room alone and unprotected would be inviting trouble. Some predatory male would probably find that she aroused his more bestial feelings, and no one would believe that she had come there for any other purpose. Moreover, the women might suspect that she intended to poach on their preserves, and Stella knew that type of courtezan too well to take any chances with their ideas of meum and tuum. She would quickly find herself in the street, stripped of her clothes and with no other adornment than innumerable scratches and bruises.

When the woman in the black frock, wobbling all over like an unstable jelly, arrived at the door Stella inquired for a girl named Ninon Grodski, and added a pathetic story that she was searching for a lost sister who had fallen on evil times and had last been heard of at the café.

But the woman knew no one of that name, and in reply to another question stated that so far as she was aware none of the women in the café had been there in the days when it had been known as the Blue Toad. She did not appear to be greatly impressed by Stella's story, but then her surroundings and occupation were not conducive to a sympathetic nature.

Stella went away rather disappointed, but at the same time relieved. Ninon had been a prostitute, but she had qualities which tended to prove that there is some good even in the worst of us. Doubtless she had been the victim of environment and circumstances, and the one man who had treated her well had been Lawrie Fenton. Certainly he had his own ends to serve, but she had fallen in love with him, with a hopeless and passionate abandonment, and without any encouragement. When

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she had realized that Fenton preferred Stella there had been a scene, for Ninon was not of the type which is taught to suppress its feelings. Stella had realized that any meeting with Ninon was likely to open old wounds, and she had not looked forward to it.

The following day she made her last effort. Noon found her on the terrace of the Café Europe, attached to the Hôtel Europe, the leading hostelry in Warsaw. In days gone by Alphonse, the head waiter at the café, had been one of Fenton's agents; not a very good one, for he was given to excitability, but he was useful as a messenger and a conveyor of information, and Stella knew him well. Perhaps he would be able to help her.

But Stella discovered that here, as elsewhere, changes had taken place. Alphonse was no longer a waiter, but was installed in a magnificent office as manager of the hotel itself. When Stella was shown in he welcomed her with outstretched arms and, to the undisguised suspicion of his secretary, who was about to leave the

room, kissed her hand.

"Ah, Madame Fenton, my little adored Stella, this is indeed a happy day!" he cried, and the secretary's suspicions deepened as she closed the door. "What good fortune is it that brings you to Warsaw?" He beamed all over his face. "And the good Lawrie? How is he?"

Stella turned away.

"I don't know," she said shortly.

"Eh?" said Alphonse, puzzled by her behaviour. "What is this? You have not quarrelled? If so, it can be nothing."

"No, it's not that," replied Stella quickly. "He's-

disappeared."

Quickly she related her story.

"So!" said Alphonse. "He is at the old game again.

He has no business to do that. Was it not good enough

for him to stay at home with his wife?"

"Unfortunately it was his wife who sent him to Wilno," Stella confessed, and made a further explanation, during which Alphonse, arrayed in faultless morning coat and striped trousers, made guttural noises indicative of profound sympathy.

"So, you see," Stella concluded, "I've searched for my old contacts, but they have all vanished, and now I come to you. You are my last hope, Alphonse. If you fail me I go to Wilno, where I shall learn

nothing."

Alphonse spread out his hands. "But what can I do?" he protested. "I have none of my old friends now. You must understand, too," he added, drawing himself up with some dignity, "that I am now manager of this great hotel. I could not risk my position by becoming involved in the affairs with which the good Fenton may busy himself."

"I see," said Stella quietly. "Not even if he was in

trouble-in grave danger?"

"Ma chérie," Alphonse protested, "what can I do? I am desolated that I cannot help you. I dare not. My position—I must consider that. What would my directors say if I became a police suspect, and with Lawrie one never knows what will happen. I am sorry, but——"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I understand," said Stella. She turned away, biting her lip. Alphonse had failed her, not because he could not give her help, but because he would not risk his position and reputation to help an old friend. With a heavy heart she walked to the window of the office and stared out across the busy Pilsudski Square. There was an uneasy silence.

Alphonse, perhaps feeling that he had not acted with the chivalry which might be expected of him, crossed

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over to Stella and put a plump white hand on her shoulder.

"I am sorry," he said, "very sorry. But what would you? It is just life."

"There may be no life for Lawrie if I do not go to his

help," retorted Stella, beginning to feel angry.

Alphonse made no reply, but as they stood by the window in silence his grip tightened upon Stella's shoulder. "Look!" he cried, and his fat white hand shot out with finger pointing. "Observe that big limousine standing over there."

"The one in grey and silver, with a long bonnet and

the chauffeur standing by the door?"

"Yes, yes," replied Alphonse impatiently. "I can tell you to whom that belongs, and maybe that will help you."

"Well?" asked Stella dully.

"It belongs to one whom you know as Ninon Grodski," said Alphonse.

"Ninon?" cried Stella. "Where does she live? Can

you-"

As she spoke she saw a smartly dressed woman emerge from a shop and enter the big limousine. The chauffeur closed the door and began to get into the driving-seat. Like a flash Stella wheeled about, gasped a hurried thanks to Alphonse, and rushed out of the door through the secretary's office, thereby giving undoubted proof to that pessimistic female that her employer had behaved improperly towards his visitor. Stella was in time to see the big grey-and-silver limousine rolling slowly across the square. There was a taxi at hand, and she jumped into it.

"Follow that big car!" she cried to the driver.

A few moments' observation assured her that he had grasped her meaning and was gaining rapidly upon the limousine, and for the first time since Alphonse's

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pronouncement she had the chance of wondering how Ninon had come to be translated from the dire poverty of the Blue Toad to a sumptuous limousine which must have cost close on a thousand pounds.

"Perhaps she has made a good marriage," thought Stella.

CHAPTER XV

You Must Play Your Hand Carefully

The big limousine slid smoothly through the traffic towards one of the newer suburbs of Warsaw, and turned into the spacious drive of a large, double-fronted house. Stella did not alight from her taxi until she had left the house some two hundred yards or more behind. Then she paid off the man and walked back, scrutinizing

the building carefully.

It had every appearance of being the residence of a merchant prince. The drive led to a great entrance porch, before which was a courtyard with room for a score of cars. Actually it was empty, the grey-and-silver limousine having been driven into a garage at the back of the building. The house was three storeys high, with long windows hung with heavy velvet curtains. From the upper windows Stella was aware that several faces were watching her approach; presumably they belonged to the female staff.

Stella mounted the half-dozen stone steps flanked by

heraldic lions and rang the bell.

A neat maid answered the summons, and, not being aware of Ninon's married name and thinking the girl would not recognize the maiden one of Grodski, Stella inquired for Madame Ninon. She was shown into a hall expensively furnished with a large number of sumptuous settees and armchairs, the polished floor of which was covered with several beautifully woven Oriental rugs. Stella thought it curious that the maid had not asked for her name. Presently the girl returned and led her down a short passage at the far end of the hall into a small room which had the appearance of an office, for there

were shelves with numerous ledgers and files, a typewriter on a table, and a pile of correspondence. An elderly woman in horn-rimmed glasses rose from the table and ushered Stella through a door on the farther side of the office.

Ninon, who was seated at an escritoire, turned as Stella entered. For a moment she stared, then her eyes opened in surprise.

"Stella Polowski," she whispered.

The two women gazed at each other. Ninon had changed a good deal from the underfed, penniless girl of the Blue Toad Café. She had put on weight, though not too much, for she had every reason to be proud of her figure. Her fair hair was beautifully waved, her eyebrows delicately and artificially arched above the hazel eyes which regarded her visitor steadily and enigmatically. There was, perhaps, a shade too much powder on her face, but, apart from that slight fault, with which only a most fastidious person would quarrel, she was beautifully made up. Her crimson lips hardly moved when at last she spoke.

"What do you want? I suppose I should address you as Mrs Fenton?" With the words her expression hardened, and her voice was as cold as drawn steel. She did not invite Stella to sit down, nor did she herself

rise.

"I have come to ask your help," said Stella simply, and Ninon laughed, a short, harsh laugh with no mirth in it.

"To ask me for help? That is very humorous. Well,

go on."

Stella told her story as concisely as possible, though she felt all the while that Ninon was antagonistic to her. She related Lawrie's disappearance and her search for acquaintances. "I went to Alphonse, and he pointed you out to me. I followed you here. You are my one hope,

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Ninon," she concluded, trying to ignore the bitter, cynical expression which had appeared on Ninon's face. "You knew Lawrie in the old days. I thought, for his sake, you might put me in touch with some one who——" She broke off. She was pleading a hopeless cause if Ninon's expression was anything to judge by. Besides, it was unlikely that in her present position of opulence Ninon would have made any effort to maintain her old friendships.

"Yes," said Ninon quietly, "I knew Lawrie in the old days. I'm not likely to forget that. And now he is lost, you tell me." Again that cynical smile appeared about her red lips. "You nearly lost him once be-

fore."

Stella said nothing. She was hardly surprised that Ninon should still feel bitter, but at the same time it seemed that she was taking considerable pleasure in making her visitor uncomfortable.

"Sit down," Ninon said abruptly.

Stella sank into an armchair. The room was plainly Ninon's own sitting-room, and, though comfortable, it was, rather to Stella's surprise, homely and lacking the ornate decoration which was so obvious in the hall. There was an awkward pause. Ninon seemed to be occupied with her thoughts. When the silence became unbearable Stella spoke.

"I was always sorry about that, Ninon."

Again Ninon gave that short, hard laugh. "Oh, I wasn't thinking about myself. I was a fool ever to have thought I had a chance against you."

The bitterness in her voice hurt Stella, but she made a brave effort to show that for her, at least, the enmity

of the past had been buried.

"I wanted to do something to help you after it was all over," she said quietly, "but Lawrie would not let me. He believed that you would have scorned any

offer of assistance, and that it would only hurt you the more."

"He was right. I should have done. Just then, when the wound was raw and open, I hated him and you and everything." Ninon held out a gold cigarette-case to Stella; it was the first amicable gesture she had made. Her own cigarette she placed in an ornate holder about eight inches long. "I thought," she continued, "that when I left Lawrie, filled with anger and hatred, I thought that was the end. More than once I nearly threw myself into the Vistula. I could not bear my way of living, and I loathed the Blue Toad, for it brought back too many memories of the time when I had been happy. But somehow I kept on, and when, after a while, the wound did not hurt quite so much I learned that it was not the end of everything, as I had imagined, but the beginning."

She drew at her cigarette and stared hard at Stella. "Do you know why? I will tell you. One day somebody sent me two hundred of your English pounds. Do

you know who that somebody was?"

Stella looked up in surprise and shook her head, but

she felt a flush creeping over her face.

"No," Ninon went on quietly, "you do not know. It was done secretly. But you can guess. So can I. Oh, but it was done with so much knowledge of me. He knew that if he had sent it immediately after that affair I should have destroyed the lot in a fit of hatred and pique. But he knew also that time can soothe old wounds, and he waited until he felt I should be able to take a more sensible view of things. Two people do not live together as a lover and his mistress do, though I was never that, without forming a fair idea of each other's character. He guessed, too, that I was not the type to spend it on drink and other foolish things. Had I not kept house for him?"

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Stella felt a lump rise in her throat. Lawrie had never breathed a word about the two hundred pounds, but he must have been aware, and she herself was able to realize, what a godsend it had proved to the poor, disillusioned prostitute who had lost her heart to him.

"That money helped to get me out of the Blue Toad into better surroundings," Ninon continued. "Some women might have refused it, but what is the use of refusing good money? Besides, the wound was not quite so painful, and I was beginning to think that Léon Charcot, as I knew him, owed me something. And money goes a long way towards mending a broken heart, don't you think?"

"Yes," Stella murmured, still feeling far from comfortable. "I suppose you were able to marry well?"

Ninon threw back her fair head and laughed, and this time the harsh note was no longer evident. "Oh, dear, no! Women of my type do not marry unless they are fools who wish to court disaster. We leave that to those who have been fortunate enough to preserve their virginity. The money took me into a better class of society. I had a little flat, and for the first time in my life I was able to save." She smiled as she saw that Stella was trying to subdue an expression of horror. "Then I found some one who took a liking to me, and installed me here. The place has paid well, my friend cannot grumble at the profits, but really I owe all my good fortune to the good Samaritan who sent me the two hundred pounds."

Stella's puzzled expression made Ninon smile. "I see you do not understand. Come with me."

Ninon led the way back into the palatial hall, past the foot of the wide, beautifully carpeted staircase, and opened a pair of double doors, to disclose a ballroom decorated in blue and silver. At one end was a bar, and

at the other, in a shallow alcove, a platform for the orchestra. A journey to the back of the house revealed another room, with shaded lights hanging low over tables covered with green baize cloth. The presence of a roulette-wheel, the squared and numbered cloth, and the 'shoe' for chemin de fer and baccarat told Stella that this was the temple of the Goddess of Chance.

"Yes, I understand now," said Stella, "and I can

well understand that the place pays."

Ninon looked at her with a peculiar smile, and without saying a word led her back into the hall until they stood at the foot of the wide staircase. "Listen," she said.

At first the house seemed strangely silent, but presently from far above them came the sound of

women's voices and subdued laughter.

"On the floor above are lounges," Ninon explained, watching Stella's face intently, "and above that are bedrooms for——" She paused, laughed, and added, "Doubtless you remember de Maupassant's story Les Filles de Madame Angôt? Well, I am Madame Angôt, and those girls up there are my daughters."

"Oh," said Stella, considerably taken aback, for she had not expected this revelation. Then she remembered the faces of the girls she had seen in the upper windows

as she came up the drive.

Ninon led the way back to her own room, and waved Stella to a chair and another cigarette. "I can guess your thoughts, Stella," she said, and the same half-cynical, half-contemptuous smile still hovered about her crimson lips. "I am not exactly what you would call respectable. But then I never was. I never had the chance to be. So why blame me for not being that which no one except our good Lord Himself could make me?"

"I am not blaming you," Stella said quickly. "I-

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I think you deserve great credit for reaching your present position, considering how handicapped you were. But

this place—it was rather a shock to me."

"You may think it dreadful, but after all it is human nature," Ninon replied. "God made some of His creatures like that, and not even the Pope and all his Cardinals can change them. Gambling and women are necessary to some people. For them it is what they call seeing life, and if they did not come here they would doubtless go elsewhere. I am lucky to have the work of looking after the place. And it is work, I assure you. You saw my secretary and the ledgers and accounts which we have to keep. But you"—Ninon's voice dropped a tone—"are the more fortunate. You won the love of a good man, married him, and bore him a son."

Again Stella felt the pricking of her conscience. "I am afraid I have not behaved towards him as I should have done since my son came. Now I suppose I am being punished. But for his enduring love I might have——"

"Been forced to follow in my footsteps?" Ninon said, and Stella nodded. "Then you ought to go on your knees and thank God every day of your life that you found Lawrie Fenton."

Stella did not answer. Ninon seemed to have become lost in thought. The pause was broken by an outburst of laughter upstairs.

"Do you think you can help me?" Stella asked

almost timidly.

"I cannot promise," Ninon replied, "but I will do my best. Lawrie will always mean a lot to me, more than I can put into words. Leave me your address, and in a few days I will communicate with you."

She was as good as her word. Three days later Stella received a letter, written in a flamboyant hand upon

pale yellow notepaper, advising her to come to the house the following evening. When she arrived she was shown into Ninon's own room. In obedience to the latter's instructions she had put on an evening gown of extravagant cut, bought expressly for the occasion. It was backless, of a pale blue, in sympathy with her eyes and fair hair.

Cut low in front, it was supported by two meagre shoulder-straps, and it fitted her figure closely. Ninon

looked her over appraisingly.

"You'll do. Better put a little more colour on your lips, though, and your eyes could have been made up more. However, never mind. I'm glad I've not got to compete with you. There's a freshness about you which makes me feel old and raddled. Yes, Paul will certainly be interested, unless I've misjudged him."

"Who is Paul?" asked Stella.

"Paul Konin, the man who owns this place. I asked vou here early so that I could explain things to you. The house doesn't really get going until about midnight." Ninon sat down by Stella and lit a cigarette. "Last night Paul came here to meet a certain man whom I understood to be a renegade Russian monk named Kaplov. They spoke together here in this room, and though I could not listen to all their conversation, I sent my secretary on some business and heard as much as I could from her room through the keyhole. Both Martin Urguhart and Lawrie were mentioned, and so far as I could make out from the fragments of their conversation, Paul is the financial backer and Kaplov the director of some project which I could not grasp, since they mentioned it only vaguely. Now Paul is coming to-night, and I've told him that you are a new recruit.

Stella flushed, but Ninon laughed. "Oh, I let you down lightly. I said that I intended to train you as a

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croupier, and thus give the gaming-room an additional attraction. But if I know Paul his interest in you will be directed towards one end only, and you must not appear to be too innocent. In fact, the less innocent you appear to be the more you are likely to learn. You understand?"

Stella nodded.

"You must play your hand carefully," Ninon continued, for on that depends how far you will have to go along an unpleasant road in order to learn anything. Above all, be careful of your drinks. I've seen Paul at work before, and if he finds a sober girl unwilling he knows that a drunken one is likely to be more complacent. I warn you he's a beast. What you learn depends entirely on you, and whether you consider the price worth paying."

"I understand," Stella said quietly. "I would pay any

price to have Lawrie back again."

Ninon looked at her calculatingly. "I believe you would, and you'd regard yourself as a sort of sacrifice." She frowned. "I'm not very happy over this, Stella. For myself I should not care. I've seen enough of the animal side of men to be callous. But for you it is different. You belong to one man only, and I would take your place if I could. But that would be useless. Paul has no interest in me, save as a business partner."

"You are doing a lot for me," said Stella gratefully, "and taking a big risk. If Paul suspects afterwards that he has given away information he will blame

you."

"Does that matter?" Ninon moved to her escritoire and opened a drawer. "So long as you learn what you want, that is all we need bother about. I can take care of myself. And, after all, if Lawrie returns safely, does the price matter?" She handed Stella a small, flat,

cream-coloured pellet. "If you find that Paul is becoming too importunate drop that in his glass. The next drink he takes will be sufficient to render him quite harmless. Put it where you can reach it quite easily and quickly. I should suggest the top of your stocking."

Stella did as she was told, and then, moved by a sudden impulse, she went up to Ninon, kissed her, and

again thanked her.

"I would do more than this for Lawrie and you if I could," Ninon said, and blinked suddenly. "Good heavens, I thought I'd forgotten how to cry! That

won't do; it will spoil my make-up."

Paul Konin proved to be a middle-aged but rather worn-looking man. He was inclined to stoutness, and his hair was thinning, though he tried to disguise the fact by growing it long and brushing it across the top of his head. His dark face was heavily lined from the nostrils to the corners of his narrow mouth, and his quick, black, button-like eyes had deep shadows beneath them. He looked at Stella calculatingly when Ninon introduced them, and suggested that they should dance. It was then that Stella quickly learned that he had a caressing, intimate way of holding his partner, as if he were appraising her body.

Presently he suggested some refreshment, and they left the now crowded dance-room for one of the lounges upstairs. Here on a settee placed in an alcove draped with heavy velvet curtains, with a table in front of them bearing champagne, they rested. Konin was interested in Stella. There was, as Ninon had said, a freshness, almost an air of innocence, about her which was a pleasing contrast to the mercenary female company which he usually kept. In a tentative sort of way he began to make love to her, and, loathing the man as she

did, Stella was too wise to repulse him.

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Though she drank sparingly, the champagne brought a flush to Stella's cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes, and somehow it made the sickening touch of his hands easier to bear. Remembering that no man likes an easy conquest, she made sufficient show of resistance for him to maintain his interest in her, and she saw that he did not intend to be moderate in his drinking. This heartened her, for when the wine gets in the wits go out. She drank glass for glass with him, recollecting what Ninon had told her; but whereas Konin undoubtedly swallowed his share, most of Stella's went secretly into the foot of the velvet curtains which hung near the end of the settee.

After a time Konin's face became flushed, and he bluntly suggested that Stella might care to see the rest of the house. "I have a private room of my own," he said, "where we should not be disturbed."

Stella shot him a sidelong glance from beneath her long lashes, smiled, and gave him to understand that she was not to be won for the mere asking. Konin was not annoyed. He had suspected as much, for this girl was different from others he had known. It occurred to him that she would make a very attractive hostess as well as a mistress. Possibly not such a good organizer as Ninon, who had a shrewd business head, but she would certainly be an asset.

"You are interested in this establishment?" he suggested, caressing her hand.

"It amuses me," Stella admitted.

"Do you think you could run one?"

"In the same way as Ninon? Yes. Have you others?"

Konin nodded, running his hand up and down her arm. "In Poznan and Torun. But first you would have to gain experience in a small place, and you would have to understand the value of secrecy. Curious people

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come here, from the highest in the land to those—well—not so high."

"These houses are secret?"

"More or less. People have to be recommended by those known to us. We want no scandals or tragedies or publicity of any kind."

"There is something thrilling in that. I have always been interested in secret societies and similar organiza-

tions."

Konin pulled Stella towards him. His thin lips

brushed her ear. "I belong to one myself."

Possibly he wished to impress Stella, or possibly the wine was driving out the wits. Stella, however, seized her opportunity, for she remembered Ninon's account of the meeting between Konin and Kaplov. She turned to him, her lips parted, her eyes shining, showing no trace of the disgust which flooded her mind.

"You do?" she cried. "How wonderful! What is it, and what does it do?"

"If I told you it would be a secret no longer."

Stella made a little moue of disappointment. "I can keep a secret as well as you. It would just be one between us."

Konin gazed at her greedily. "I might tell you if you were nice to me."

"That depends on what exactly you did tell me."

"Why do you want to know?"

Stella shrugged her bare shoulders, and withdrew along the settee. "I don't really mind if you tell me or not, but it amuses me to tease you." Idly she tickled the palm of his hand with her forefinger.

"You attractive little devil!" whispered Konin

ardently. "Give me a kiss."

He leaned forward, but Stella pushed him away smilingly. Konin was not to be put off so easily, how-

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ever. He tried again, with all the persistence of the semi-intoxicated.

"Perhaps I will if you tell me the name of this society—if you really do belong to one," bargained Stella, straining her face away from him.

Stella, straining her face away from him.
"Very well." Konin's caution was submerged by the rising tide of passion and desire. "It's the Society of

the Herons., Now kiss me."

Stella obeyed, and she allowed her lips to linger against his mouth longer than she would have done had she not suddenly remembered the toy heron which Lawrie had sent to his son.

"That's no kiss," Konin protested as she withdrew. "That's a sisterly peck, and I want you to be more than a sister to me." He drank copiously from his glass.

"I didn't stipulate what kind of kiss," retorted Stella, with a smile which went to his head swifter than the

champagne.

"You're not playing fair," Konin protested, and filled her glass, pressing it to her mouth, so that she was forced to drink.

"You've been well rewarded for that meagre piece of information. Who are these herons?"

"Oh, a political society with which you needn't

bother your pretty head."

Stella looked at him with parted lips, holding his gaze, while she adroitly emptied most of her champagne into the convenient curtain.

"But I am interested. I've never known anyone like you before. Do you meet in solemn conclave and discuss

-what?"

"All kinds of things. Listen, if I—"

"Where?" demanded Stella teasingly.

"I shan't tell you that unless you are very kind to me indeed."

"You old Shylock!" Stella put her mouth close to

his. "Tell me if I kiss you again?"

Konin, fascinated by her seductiveness, shook his head. Stella kissed him slowly, softly and voluptuously. His hot, moist lips nauseated her, but she contrived to smile.

"Now tell me."

"No. I want more than that."

Stella lay back on the settee alluringly. Konin feasted his eyes on her figure, and saw that her frock had worked up above her knee. Stella felt his gaze moving over her, felt as if he was mentally stripping her clothes from her. She saw his mercilessly cruel eyes, the eyes of a beast. Suddenly he dragged her towards him.

"I will tell you if you will come to my room," he

whispered passionately.

Stella, though he was becoming more repulsive each minute, slid an arm about his neck, strained towards him, and murmured in a low voice, "Let us go, then."

They ascended the stairs, Stella feeling hot waves of shame and disgust flowing over her as Konin ardently caressed her. They were not the only couple which had sought privacy, for from several of the rooms there

came the sound of laughter.

The room which they entered, after Konin had fumblingly turned the key, was comfortably furnished, but the object which immediately took Stella's eye was a wide divan bed. Having put the champagne within convenient reach, Konin sat on the bed and held out his arms. With a reluctance which was by no means forced Stella sat down beside him and lay back on the pillow. Konin bent over her. He fumbled with the slender shoulder-strap of her frock, but she stayed his hand.

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"First keep your part of the bargain," she said.

"But will you keep yours?" he muttered thickly.

"How can I help it? I am in your power. You can lock the door if you wish. I am yours," she added in a whisper.

"Very well," he said, humouring her, and for the next three minutes Stella listened and asked questions, the answers to which were burned upon her memory.

"Now," said Konin with a hiccup, and leaned upon

her as she lay upon the pillows.

With her free hand Stella pulled up her frock and sought the little pellet which reposed in the top of her stocking.

"Wait; let us have some more champagne," she

said.

Konin drew away, and she went to the table. Standing with her back to him as he sat drunkenly upon the bed, it was the work of a second to drop the pellet into his glass and fill it with champagne. The pellet fizzed with the golden liquid and dissolved immediately. She handed him the glass and raised her own.

"To love!" she cried.

Konin echoed the words, looking meaningly at her, but Stella was thinking of Lawrie. Konin drained his glass, beckoned to her, nodded twice in a peculiar, automatic manner, like some grotesque doll, and then fell forward in a heap on the floor.

Stella stared at him, and was suddenly overwhelmed with a dreadful feeling of nausea. She fled from the

room.

Ninon turned as the door of her boudoir opened to see a white and trembling Stella. "Well?" she asked anxiously.

"I learned what I wanted," said Stella.

" And? "

"He's up there insensible. The pellet."

Ninon nodded. "What are you going to do?"
"Go home, have a bath, and burn these clothes," said
Stella fiercely. "I don't think I shall ever feel clean again."

Ninon nodded and kissed her. "I understand," she

said gravely.

CHAPTER XVI

That is Your Fellow-Englishman

At the foot of the slope the lake lay like a shield of pale blue beneath the cloudless sky. Occasionally a faint zephyr of wind stirred the calm surface into tiny ripples and whispered among the reeds and sedges which clothed the shore. On the north side of the water a small hamlet was situated. Less than a score of poor dwellings clustered round a tiny bay. The slope behind the cottages was marked with a few fields, in some of which cattle grazed, and a number of rowing-boats drawn out of the water gave further evidence of how the inhabitants lived.

Farther to the west a small island rose out of the lake. It stood some eight hundred yards from the shore, and that part of it which was not covered by pine-trees was occupied by the grey stones of the ancient Castle of Zec. One corner of the building was lapped by the water and surmounted by a short, squat tower with a pointed roof. It was not a large place, and, indeed, resembled a border keep rather than what is generally understood by the term castle. But before the days of artillery it must have been impregnable. Its numerous rooms and vaults were capable of housing probably two hundred men. The steep, rocky cliffs of the island prevented any landings except on the tiny beach dominated by the castle walls, where any intruders would be entirely at the mercy of the defenders for over two hundred yards of open ground. The man who had built the place in days when Poland was less peaceful than it is now had known what he was about. With walls some five feet thick and only one avenue of approach, he could close the massive doors and

with a mere handful of men defy a force which outnumbered his own many times.

The peasants who lived in the neighbouring hamlet took little interest in the castle. For many years it had remained empty, and no one quite knew to whom it belonged. There was a rumour that its owner had been killed in the War, but recently it had been occupied by a semi-religious body, which, so the villagers understood, cared for those who desired a rest from the turmoil of the modern world. A motor-boat occasionally called at the village to meet these visitors or to put them ashore again when they had been restored to spiritual health. Invariably they arrived and were taken away by motor-

car during the night.

The only dealings which the villagers had with the Castle of Zec were in matters of food. Daily supplies of milk and sometimes fish were left on the little stone jetty below the great door. Very occasionally Johannes, who acted as keeper and general custodian, would shout to the peasant who brought the supplies that meat or, perhaps, chickens and one or two other of the few commodities which the hamlet could supply would be required so many days later. For other food the castle depended on its own supplies. Plenty of notice was always given, and payment for the goods was left on the jetty steps. Since Zec had been inhabited the peasants had found a convenient market for their produce, and they were careful to respect the wishes of the inhabitants, who obviously did not desire to have their seclusion disturbed.

Johannes was the only person whom the villagers had seen clearly, though once or twice they had caught glimpses of a tall, elderly man, with a grey moustache and keen blue eyes, who dressed in a monkish habit. No one, however, thought of trying to converse with Johannes, who, some of the bolder spirits vowed, was

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wrong in the head. Sometimes they cast anxious glances at him as he stood at the castle gates staring at them and shouting almost unintelligible remarks as they delivered the milk at the jetty.

He was a tall fellow, some six feet two inches in height, but his broad shoulders were bowed as with toil, and his age was difficult to guess. He walked with a peculiar shambling gait, and his heavy grey brows were drawn down over dark, peering eyes, his nose was wrinkled like a bulldog's, and his upper lip retracted, so that, though his expression was fierce, he also gave the people the idea that he was either short-sighted or was trying to pierce the veil of something which he did not understand.

Poor Johannes! None of his surviving comrades, officers or men of the Prussian Guard, would have recognized him as the smart Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten, a stickler for discipline, who had fought so valiantly with them in 1917. They imagined that he was dead, and, indeed, those who had seen that shallow cleft in his skull. which ran like a livid scar through his grey cropped hair from back to front, wondered how he had recovered from that awful wound. His great strength had pulled him through, although his experiences as a prisoner in Russia, first in hospital and later buffeted by the tempest of the Revolution, would have killed a weaker man. As it was, his mind had been warped and twisted. He alone knew the awful terror of the strange dreams to which he was subjected. Sane enough in some things, he lived in a world of his own, to which no one but himself possessed the key. One thing stood out boldly from his realm of phantasy, as a pillar of rock stands up through the swirling mists, and that was blind, unhesitating obedience to the man with the keen blue eyes who employed him. Probably it was the result of his long-forgotten military training, but it was also obedience through fear, and not through affection.

On that morning when the lake lay peaceably beneath a blue sky and sun warmed the ancient stones of the castle Johannes, having collected the daily consignment of milk from the jetty, re-entered the castle and, turning down a long passage which led towards the tower built into the lake, descended a short flight of steps and arrived at a heavy iron door. This he unlocked, flung open, and ejaculated briefly in German, "Come."

From the far side of the tiny cell, scarcely twelve feet square and one of many built into the foot of the tower, a spare figure rose from a three-legged stool. Fenton showed little of the ordeal through which he was passing. His face was thinner, more lined, especially about the eyes, and he was pale from his confinement in the gloomy cell, which was lit only by one long, narrow window that looked out across the lake at water-level. On days when a stiff breeze blew towards the tower the water would splash through the aperture.

He had been almost starved since he had arrived at Zec from Old Karas's hut. At the very moment when he had stumbled through the doorway into the night, believing that he had escaped, Konrad had risen out of the darkness and pinioned his arms, while Slawski had

bludgeoned him with the butt of an automatic.

Fenton had known nothing of the journey to the Castle of Zec, for he had been unconscious and suffering from concussion. For several days he had lain in the cell, until his tough constitution had readjusted itself. He knew that he was in the tightest corner it had ever been his misfortune to enter, but he did not allow that to depress his spirits. Perhaps help would come. If it didn't there was but one alternative. In the meantime he was still alive, and must derive what comfort he could from that circumstance.

"Morning, Johannes," he grinned. "Are we to attend another meeting of the parish council?"

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Johannes did not answer, but stood aside, watching Fenton with wary eyes, so that his prisoner might precede him. He did not understand this strange man who spoke German fluently, took everything as a joke, and seemed to be without fear. He knew he was English, and his poor, muddled brain told him that for some reason which he could not remember he ought to hate him, whereas in actual fact he rather liked the fellow, because Fenton was the only person in the castle who spoke to him in a friendly way.

Fenton mounted the steps and walked along the stone passage until he came to a wide staircase also built of

stone.

"Up," said Johannes, and when Fenton had reached

the top he added, "Left turn."

Once Fenton, in order to see what would happen, had turned right and kept on when Johannes had called him back. The result had been somewhat humiliating, for the Prussian had shambled after him, picked him up so that Fenton had felt his ribs cracking beneath the pressure, carried him as easily as one carries a child past the head of the stairs, and deposited him none too gently outside the door of a room. Fenton had not repeated the experiment. He realized that in a trial of strength with Johannes there could be only one result.

He knew the route well enough now, and obediently he wheeled to the left and came to a halt outside a massive wooden door. Johannes called out, received an answer, and ordered Fenton to enter. The latter was well acquainted with the interior. The room was large, with a wide fireplace at one end. Two big windows let in long shafts of sunlight, and Fenton had realized that they must look over the lake, for he had never been able to see anything through them except the sky. A few rugs were scattered over the solid wood floor, in the centre of which stood a long table. The walls were bare

stone, but there were bookcases, a few ornaments, several armchairs, and a large pile of correspondence and newspapers. It was a Spartan apartment, although not without some comfort.

On the far side of the long table, with their backs to the windows, sat Malakoff, Wilenski, Markevicius, and Konrad. Without waiting to be told, Fenton sat down in the solitary chair opposite. Several times already he had thus faced his captors, and had been subjected to Malakoff's hypnotical treatment and a pitiless rain of questions. Always he had been able to keep absolute control of himself, but the strain was beginning to tell. The scanty food, the close confinement and discomfort of his cell, the ever-present, nagging worry of what was happening in the outside world, thoughts of Stella and Peter, Kovel, Sir George Fawley, and Catherine, were having their effect. Surely these four men were bound to win in the end?

"Good morning," he said politely, when he had taken his seat. "Do we continue the discussion as usual?"

Four pairs of eyes stared at him. There was no reply. The minutes passed slowly by. Only the faint whisper of the wind and the deep breathing of Johannes, as he stood behind Fenton's chair, disturbed the silence.

"Look at me," said Malakoff presently, and Fenton knew better than to refuse, for immediately he did so Johannes' vice-like grip would descend upon his neck, and his head would be forced round towards the Russian. To close his eyes was equally unavailing, for Johannes, under Malakoff's instructions, pushed the point of a knife deeper and deeper into his neck, until he opened them once more.

"To whom have you imparted your knowledge of the Herons?" then asked Malakoff in a deep voice.

"To whom have you imparted your knowledge of the Herons?" snarled Markevicius.

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"To whom have you imparted your knowledge of the Herons?" asked Konrad coldly.

"To whom have you imparted your knowledge of the Herons?" Wilenski spat out venomously.

Fenton sighed. "I should have thought it might have dawned on you by now that I don't intend to answer."

They took no notice. Malakoff asked the question again. It was repeated by Markevicius, Konrad, and Wilenski. So the interrogation went on. Fenton made no further attempt at conversation. He knew from experience that they would ignore it. He tried to detach his mind from his surroundings, but it was difficult, for Malakoff held him with his eyes, and the question was sometimes whispered and at other times shouted. Directly Fenton moved his head Johannes' fingers would

be plunged into the back of his neck.

For two hours the question was spoken, until the room seemed filled with the varying sounds of the four voices. At the end of that time the sweat was streaming down Malakoff's harsh features, so great had been his effort to hold down Fenton's attention. The latter also had felt the strain. A queer mental numbness had crept over him, and he felt very tired. The only consolation he could derive from his ordeal was that the interrogation proved that Malakoff was still uncertain as to what he— Fenton—had accomplished, and whether or not he had shared his possible knowledge with anyone. So long as Malakoff considered that his prisoner had information to impart Fenton felt that he was safe; but he knew they would kill him directly they had no more use for him.

At the end of the two hours, which seemed like all eternity to Fenton, Malakoff rose from his chair, and, bidding Johannes follow and keep a tight hold on his prisoner, he descended the stairs into the corridor below. Instead, however, of turning towards the tower, he took

the opposite direction. Descent of a further and longer flight of stone steps brought them into the foundations of the castle, hewn out of the solid rock of the island. Malakoff took an electric torch from a pocket of the long monk's habit which he wore and led the way along a passage not more than five feet wide. Presently he stopped at an iron-studded door, which he opened with

a key taken from Johannes' bunch.

The stench which flowed from the dark hole made Fenton gasp. The cell was dimly lit by one narrow vertical slit high up in the wall, but by the light of Malakoff's torch Fenton saw a queer-shaped thing which moved gropingly about the damp floor. Presently something which had once been human crept towards the door. Fenton was aware of a white face, across which the skin was stretched so tightly that it seemed that the bones must burst through at any moment. A dirty, tangled mop of reddish hair hung over eyes that, though they were mere slits sunk into the man's head, blinked in the torch's beam. The sharp-pointed nose and the narrow mouth, as well as the colour of the hair, revealed the poor wretch's identity to Fenton long before Malakoff spoke.

"That," said the Russian, "is your fellow-Englishman, Martin Urquhart, who, like you, sought to know too much. I have sucked him dry, and what you see is the empty shell of a mindless human being. Fortunately for us he worked alone and kept his knowledge to him.

self."

Urquhart knelt unsteadily on the floor, and moped and moved at the three men who watched him.

"Except for coming to my room to be questioned, he has only left this cell once since he first entered it several months ago," said Malakoff. "That once was when he escaped from Johannes' grasp. He hid, and we could not find him. Somehow he must have got out of the

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castle and swum to the mainland, and we caught him several miles away, just as he was on the point of using

the telephone."

Malakoff paused. Urquhart muttered incoherently and gesticulated with his frail hands. Fenton watched him with mixed feelings of pity and admiration. Pity because he had finally succumbed to Malakoff's devilish treatment, admiration because he had worked alone, and when in dire peril had so far retained his courage as to escape from Zec and make his way across-country in spite of Malakoff's close search for him. Until Urquhart had been found Malakoff must have had some very unpleasant thoughts of the future.

"He is not a pretty sight," remarked Malakoff gently, shutting the door. "It would be as well, Mr Fenton, for you to answer my questions next time it is my pleasure to interrogate you, lest that cell should become over-

crowded by the addition of another tenant."

Fenton looked Malakoff squarely in the face and smiled. "Aren't there quite a lot of things you would like to know, Malakoff—alias Kaplov?" he retorted.

As Malakoff turned to lead the way back along the narrow passage Fenton saw the expression of his eyes change and a look of apprehension pass over his face. Fenton chuckled inwardly. It had been a shot in the dark, but more than once Fenton had suspected that Malakoff was Kaplov, and the natural way in which Malakoff wore his monk's cassock, not an easy or particularly comfortable garment for one unused to it, had strengthened his theory. Now Fenton was sure that he was right, and that he had given Malakoff a nasty jolt. Doubtless Malakoff was wondering how much more Fenton knew.

Left alone in his cell once more, Fenton knelt down and, in the dust and dirt which lay like a thick carpet upon the floor, began to draw a plan of the castle, in so

far as he knew it. The position of his own cell, the route to Malakoff's room, and thence to Urquhart's dungeon, came fairly well, for in spite of his privations his memory still possessed its almost photographic retentiveness, but there were many features of the building of which he was ignorant, and so far as he could see he would remain ignorant. This was a pity, for the knowledge that Urquhart had once escaped and defied his captors for a considerable time had filled Fenton with renewed hope.

He already knew every inch of his own cell. The window was narrow and barred with a thick iron rod sunk into the stone-work and set in solid lead. The floor was of stone, the ceiling out of reach. There remained the door. That too was impregnable, but it would be a comparatively easy matter to hit Johannes on the head with the stool when he brought in a meal. The immediate future, however, would be full of perils and difficulties, for since Fenton had been unconscious on his arrival he had no idea of the environs of the castle. Moreover, Johannes would soon be missed and a search made. If Fenton were to stand any chance at all it was imperative that he should have a long start of the pursuit, for he was beginning to feel the effects of his confinement. His strength and stamina might not withstand a severe test, and the longer he delayed his bid for freedom the more difficult it would become.

He considered the problem for a long time. Three things stood out prominently. His escape would have to be made by way of the door. He would have to gain possession of the keys which Johannes always wore attached to his belt by a chain. The attempt must be made at night, after Johannes had visited him for the last time. If only he could be sure of the exits from the castle and the place where the motor-boat was kept things would be much easier. More than once, by stand-

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ing on his stool and peering through the narrow window, he had seen the craft chugging towards the mainland, and on its return it had vanished from sight

on his right.

While he was thinking he suddenly heard the sound of Johannes' key in the cell-door. With a swift movement of his foot he effaced the plan he had drawn in the dirt and began to play noughts and crosses. Johannes, who had brought Fenton's supper, looked at him questioningly, kicked the door shut, and came closer.

"That is a game?" he grunted in German.

Fenton nodded, added a cross with his left hand and a nought with his right, then smudged everything out.

"Show me," said Johannes, with childlike simplicity.

Fenton explained.

"Ja, so," muttered the wreck of a Prussian officer.

"Now I play you."

They played four games. Fenton won two, one was drawn, and he allowed Johannes to win the fourth, which pleased him tremendously. There were times when the Prussian had peculiarly simple and childish moods.

"Again," he grunted, and bent frowning over the

design.

Fenton looked at the close-cropped head, with its livid scar, thought of his only weapon, the stool, and glanced longingly from the keys at Johannes' belt to the cellar-door. Almost he was tempted to take the chance, but he desisted. Such a rash endeavour could only fail, and he would get no second opportunity.

Absently he made a cross. Immediately Johannes inscribed a nought in the dirt and exclaimed in triumph,

"I win!"

Fenton grinned. "You do."

And then quite suddenly the glimmering of an idea began to take shape in his brain. "To-morrow I teach
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you another game," he said. "Much the same, only more interesting."

"Good," grunted Johannes. "I come as usual." He looked at Fenton with his curious peering, scowling expression. "I like you," he said, "even though you are English."

CHAPTER XVII

We May Call Ourselves Allies

The day following her adventure with Paul Konin Stella left Warsaw for Wilno. Konin had given her information upon which she could act, but Wilno must be her jumping-off place, and she considered it would be wise to interview Gustav Kovel. He might feel disposed to help her, though she was not too sanguine about this, but if she failed to report to him Sir George Fawley was likely to do astonishing things in order to discover where she had gone, and Stella foresaw that in the near future she would want to be undisturbed.

She had a surprising reception in the city, for as she reached the modest hotel she had selected an excited and shouting newsboy almost cannoned into her. She caught sight of the poster he carried, and the words, "Attempted Assassination in Wilno" made her heart thump unpleasantly. Some instinct told her that this incident concerned her, and she bought a paper. Unfolding it in the lounge of the hotel, she read a brief account of how a young man named Gustav Kovel was shot at and wounded outside the Café of the Thin Heron in Bielsk Street during the early hours of the morning. The assailant escaped, and Kovel was lying dangerously ill at the George Hotel. The motive for the crime was unknown.

With a sudden sinking of the heart Stella gathered up her things and hurried out of the hotel. Gustav, dangerously wounded, had suddenly assumed great importance. He might die before he could pass on information which would be of value to her. At the George Hotel, however, Stella was very coldly received.

Gustav Kovel was too ill to see anyone, and nothing she could say would make any difference. But Stella was not to be defeated so easily. She scribbled a few words on a piece of paper and gave it to the maid with a handsome tip and a promise of further largesse if she would pass it on to Mr Kovel. Ten minutes later the girl returned with the news that the sick man would see her immediately.

Stella expected to find Gustav lying pale and ill between the sheets. Instead he rose easily from an arm-

chair and greeted her with outstretched hand.

"So here you are at last," he said smilingly. "Sir George advised me you were coming. Where have you been?"

"I broke my journey at Warsaw," explained Stella, and added in a puzzled way, "But I thought you were

dangerously ill. Weren't you shot?"

Gustav laughed as he led her to a chair and produced cigarettes. "I was certainly shot at and wounded, but only very slightly." He patted his left upper arm. "Just a graze there, but the blighter certainly meant otherwise. He had three attempts, and if he wasn't such a rotten marksman I wouldn't be here."

"Well, it's a great relief to know you've escaped," said Stella. "The newspapers took a very gloomy view.

They also said your assailant escaped."

"I asked the Press to print that, so that I should be undisturbed. Incidentally, we've got the would-be murderer."

"What I really wanted to know," Stella asked urgently, "is whether you have any news of Lawrie?"

Gustav's expression changed, and he looked acutely uncomfortable. "No actual news of him, I am afraid, but we have a good deal of information about the—er—affair in which he was interested"—Gustav pointed to a thick wad of typescript which he had been study-

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ing—"the Society of the Herons. My assassin has been made to talk, and though he professes to know nothing about Lawrie, he told us a good many things in the hope that we may deal leniently with him."

"Do you think there is any chance of Lawrie getting free?" Stella asked, and was surprised at her calmness and self-control, for she spoke of Lawrie as if he was no

more than a name to her.

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"I cannot say. We have yet to locate the headquarters of the Society. That, I feel sure, won't take long now, for I have many good men investigating. We know already that Lawrie went to Ezerenai, over the Lithuanian border, and visited the famous Café of the Thin Heron. The town is full of herons, for there is a celebrated heronry close by. After that he vanished, but I expect he is at the headquarters of the Society, and when we find that we shall strike."

Stella nodded thoughtfully. She remembered the toy heron which Lawrie had sent to Peter. If she had not been so preoccupied with their son she would have noticed the postmark, and that doubtless would have led her to Ezerenai. However, she had gained her information in another way, and, indeed, she knew more than Gustav, for Paul Konin, in his fit of drunken amorousness, had told her the situation of the head-quarters of the Society of the Herons. But she did not intend to share her knowledge with Kovel.

"How will you strike?" she asked.

"As hard, as quickly as possible, and without mercy," said Kovel. "If they will not surrender, and show fight, we shall exterminate them, bomb them out of existence if necessary."

"But if Lawrie is with them?" Stella said, quietly

watching Gustav.

The Pole was rather taken aback. With the major issue before him he had forgotten his friend. He ran a

hand over his long black hair and recrossed his legs

nervously.

"Yes, of course. It may be difficult to get in touch with him without giving the Herons a warning that they have been discovered. We must avoid that, for we want them all, dead or alive. The issues are so serious that it is hard to say what may happen."

"But surely you would not endanger Lawrie's life?"

cried Stella.

Again Kovel made a quick, nervous gesture. "No, no! Every effort will be made to assist him, but in such a grave matter we dare not risk other than a successful conclusion to our enterprise. Remember, please, that the peace and security of Poland are at stake. On the other hand, the Herons may try to use Lawrie as a hostage for their freedom."

"And you would bargain with them?"

"I would not bargain with men like that," said Gustav fiercely, his dark eyes flashing. "Where my country

is concerned I can have no mercy."

"I understand," said Stella quietly, so quietly, indeed, that if Gustav had not been preoccupied with the problem before him he might have been suspicious. For Gustav was taking the view which Stella had anticipated. A patriot to the point of fanaticism, not even the life of one of his best friends would be allowed to stand in the way of what he considered to be his duty.

More than ever was Stella glad that she had kept the secret of the Herons' headquarters to herself, for while Kovel was searching for it she must try to rescue Lawrie. Stella was not a bit concerned with the security of Poland; in her view that was a very small thing compared with the life of her husband. Having learned something of considerable importance, she changed the subject.

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"Sir George told me that Catherine Borodoshin has

vanished," she said. "Is that true?"

Gustav nodded. "Our inquiries have revealed that she was arrested outside her flat four days after Lawrie left Wilno, and taken off in a car. Several people saw the incident, but unfortunately the police have no knowledge of the matter."

"Then who arrested----"

"Presumably the Herons in disguise. No doubt they thought that her association with Urquhart, and latterly with Lawrie, might have led to her knowing more than was good for their safety. They weren't going to take any chances. We have found no trace of the woman."

"I see," said Stella. "So that makes three people

missing."

"There was nearly a fourth this morning," Gustav remarked, fondling his stiffened left arm. "However, those Herons won't flourish much longer. As I say, I have good men and good stuff to work on. It won't be long before we have the birds caged."

"Then I wish you luck," said Stella, rising from her chair. "And now I mustn't interrupt you any more, for I can see you are busy. I feel more at ease having seen you, and if there is anything I can do to help you just let me know. I shall be staying here for a time."

"I'll give you all the news I can," replied Gustav Kovel as he escorted her to the door, "and rest assured that I will do everything within reason to assist

Lawrie."

Stella smiled cynically to herself as she walked back to her hotel. Kovel had betrayed himself completely. He was no longer the friendly young man whom she had first known, but the fully fledged official concerned only with what he considered his duty. She knew the depth of his patriotism, and it was plain that he would sacrifice his friend rather than let his schemes fail.

Stella did not wait for any news that Gustav might send her. There was need for haste, for his plans might mature before she found Lawrie. That afternoon she left Wilno by train, making sure that she was not followed, for she did not altogether trust Kovel, and she took the road north towards the lake which Paul Konin had described to her.

First of all travelling by train, then by motor-bus, she had at length to hire a peasant and his cart to take her along the rough road within measurable distance of her destination. The final part of the journey was made on foot, for she did not want any curious villagers to talk about her. Although she had brought a pencil and a sketching-block as an excuse for her presence in this part of the country, she was playing a lone hand, and any whisper about a stranger might reach the suspicious ears of the Herons.

Her spare clothes she carried in a rucksack, and the night before she reached the lake she slept in the open among the trees, because from then onward she wanted to avoid all habitations. Over her jumper and short tweed skirt she wore a loose mackintosh which successfully concealed a slight bulge below her ribs where her automatic pistol reposed. Heavy shoes and a pull-on hat which shielded her face completed her outfit.

When at last she reached the lake it was late afternoon, and the tree-tops were silhouetted against a sinking sun. The Castle of Zec was bathed in pure yellow light, which gave it a peculiar, fairylike appearance, not at all in keeping with the sinister reputation which it had for the girl who moved cautiously along the fringe of the forest. She lay down and observed the building and the island through a pair of powerful binoculars, but her position was not an ideal one, for she was looking from the back of the island which lay

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between her and Zec. She returned to the forest and made a detour round the hamlet, so that finally the latter and the castle lay upon her right hand. Then she worked her way down to a point where the trees came within a couple of hundred yards of the water's

edge.

She now had a splendid view of Zec. The westering sun picked out the great stones with which it was built, and tinged their austere greyness with a softening yellow. She saw the squat tower, with the waters of the lake lapping its base, and the tremendous walls running back on to the land, the dark shadows of the pines beyond, and the precipitous cliffs sufficiently high to deter an inexperienced climber. The jetty and the main entrance to Zec were hidden by the rotundity of the tower. Nothing moved either on the island or about the castle, and only a thin film of smoke rising from an unseen chimney showed that the place was inhabited.

Stella turned her attention to the hamlet. People and animals moved among the cottages, but what interested her most were the boats drawn up along the shore. They provided a means of reaching the island, but it was difficult to see how she was going to procure one without disclosing her presence. Knowing the peasantry of her own country, she felt sure the villagers would be under the influence of the castle and likely to report the movements of any stranger in the vicinity. And then, as she was taking note of the positions of the various houses and considering the possibility of stealing a boat by night, a slight movement in the undergrowth a little farther down the slope on which she lay caught her eye.

She turned her glasses on to the spot, and at once the dark, indistinct figure of a man sprang into view. A sudden chill clutched at Stella's heart. This must be

one of Kovel's men, which meant that in a very short time Gustav would know the situation of the Herons' headquarters. Before he could act Lawrie must be rescued. But how was Stella to effect that rescue? She had only just arrived, and had not been able to tackle even the beginning of the problem. At all costs she must gain time, prevent Gustav from receiving this vital information, prevent this man from imparting his knowledge. Stella put away the binoculars and, drawing her automatic, began to creep through the undergrowth.

Quite unsuspicious that anyone was approaching him from the rear, the man continued to study the castle through glasses, and Stella was so anxious to get to close quarters that with her eyes fixed on her quarry she failed to observe a small dead branch which lay in her path. As she put her knee upon it it broke with a sharp snap. The man lowered his glasses and turned quickly, to see the blunt nose of an automatic pistol pointing

steadily at him from a range of some six yards.

"Don't make a sound or a movement, or I shall fire,"

whispered Stella.

The man remained silent and motionless, but after a second or two a look of utter astonishment came into his face. "You're Stella Fenton!" he muttered in a peculiar voice.

The words were a shock to Stella. "Who are you?

How do you know me?" she demanded.

"I'm Catherine Borodoshin. Lawrie once showed me

your photograph. I wrote to you from Wilno."

Stella's gaze travelled swiftly over the crouching figure. Now that she was nearer she could see a certain wideness in the hips beneath the dark cloth trousers and a fullness in the chest which a high-necked navy-blue sweater could not disguise.

"What did you write?"

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Unhesitatingly the stranger quoted correctly almost the whole of the letter.

"And what are you doing here?"

"May I get into a more comfortable position?"

Stella nodded, but did not lower her pistol.

"When I returned from the Consulate after asking them to forward that letter to you I was arrested. Not by police, as I imagined at first, but by men disguised in police uniforms. I was taken to a house in a poor quarter of Wilno and kept a prisoner there. A few days ago the place became strangely silent, no food was brought to me, and no one answered my shouts. Finally I managed to break through the door with a chair. Even that noise did not attract any attention, and I walked out unhindered. I still retained my handbag and some money, so I bought these clothes, because I thought they would be more convenient than skirts, and made my way here."

"Why?" came the blunt question. "Why did you

not go to the police?"

"Because of a clue that Martin Urquhart had given me and Lawrie had partly explained. I had memorized the wording, and, having nothing else to do, had worked away at it while I was shut up. Your husband had hinted that a map might be useful, so when I was free I bought one, and by its aid, coupled with his interpretation of the clue, I was able to deduce that the Castle of Zec is the headquarters of the Society of the Herons. I also believe that your husband and possibly my—my lover, Martin Urquhart, are held prisoners there."

"I know they are," retorted Stella grimly, "though I obtained my information in a different way from yours. What you have told me tallies with my own knowledge.

I think we may call ourselves allies."

She lowered her pistol and held out her hand, which Catherine gripped firmly. The dark eyes beneath the

cloth cap, which was pulled well down over the level brows, looked steadily into Stella's blue ones. "Please God we may also be successful!" said Catherine.

While they took turns in watching the castle they discussed the problem and pooled their accumulated knowledge. Stella related her interview with Gustav Kovel, and stressed the need for haste, and Catherine told of what she had seen during the two days she had been by the lake-side. This was, in fact, very little, and amounted to no more than the time of delivery of supplies to the castle, though the previous night there had come three carloads of men from the village, who in due course had been taken to the island by motor-boat.

It was while Stella was resting that Catherine, whose glasses were focused on the castle, gave a low cry. "Look, Stella! Quick! At the foot of the tower! That narrow window!"

In a flash Stella had fixed her binoculars on the spot. The sun was near the skyline opposite the tower, and the low, level rays of light lit up the dark embrasure. They could see a pale face peering from the barred window, but at that distance it was difficult to distinguish features.

"Has he—has he got red hair?" asked Catherine in

a trembling voice.

"I don't think so," Stella replied, trying to keep her glasses steady. "He's fair. I think—it's—it's my husband."

The face disappeared, and though both women kept an unfailing watch until the light faded, it did not reappear. Over a frugal meal, for they had both brought provisions with them, they discussed what could be done. The possibility of reaching the castle by boat was fraught with the danger of discovery, for to obtain the boat it would be necessary to enter the hamlet,

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where there seemed to be an unusual number of watch-

ful dogs.

"The only other way," said Stella, "is to swim. That window is almost at water-level, and a swimmer is less obvious than a boat."

"I can't swim," said Catherine.

"Well, I can. You must remain here and keep watch."

That night after darkness had fallen and the inhabitants of the hamlet, who rose and retired with the sun, had gone to bed the two women moved quietly down to a small sandy bay. Here Stella undressed and crept to the water's edge, moving like a ghost, for her white body stood out uncannily in the gloom. With a wave to Catherine, concealed among the bushes, she waded on until the water reached her waist. Then she began to swim, using a silent and effortless breast-stroke.

She passed through a belt of weeds which clung caressingly to her limbs and touched her body with gentle, slimy fingers, and headed for the castle, which stood out in black silhouette against the night sky. After the chill of the evening air the water felt pecu-

liarly warm and was as unruffled as a tropic sea.

The distance was greater than it had looked by daylight, but presently the huge bulk of the Castle of Zec loomed above Stella, dark and forbidding. Her fingers touched the rough stone of the tower, and after resting for a moment or two she began to work round towards the window where she had seen Lawrie, moving as quietly as an otter. She discovered that she could reach the sill and draw herself up, but the wall of the tower was so thick that she could see nothing except an intense blackness. She hung on the sill, half out of the water, listening, but there was no sound save the mournful cry of some distant night-bird.

"Lawrie! Lawrie!" she cried, raising her voice as much as she dared.

She sank back into the water, but only the call of the night-bird answered her. Again she called, and as her voice died away there sounded the iron rattle of a window opening in the tower above her. A torch was switched on, and the beam began searching the water. Silently and swiftly Stella sank until only her nose remained above water, and she crouched against the tower wall, her bare toes mingling with the weeds which grew upon the stone-work. Her eyes watched the questing beam, and when it swung near her she took a deep breath and sank.

When she came to the surface again the light had moved away to the left, she heard a faint murmur of voices, and the window above was closed. She waited for some time, and then began to swim back to the mainland with a heavy heart. The attempt to get into communication with her husband had failed, but at least it had shown her that those in the castle were very

alert.

Stella supposed that her husband had been moved to another part of the building, but as a matter of fact Fenton had had a trying time with Malakoff and had fallen into a deep sleep of exhaustion, from which Stella's soft call had failed to rouse him.

Stella swam back towards the dark line of the land, feeling desperately despondent. The chance of getting Lawrie out of Zec had suddenly become very remote. After a brief search she located Catherine, and was glad of the rub-down which the latter gave her, for she was cold after her long immersion. Rather dismally she told her story.

"I never imagined it would be an easy nut to crack," said Catherine. "I still believe our only chance is to take a boat from the village. If we get on to the island

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by night and hide the boat no one will be any the wiser, except the owner of the boat, and he won't know where it is."

"One thing we must not forget," replied Stella. "Our attempt must not fail, for we shall never have a second chance."

CHAPTER XVIII

I Will Get You Out of This Place

JOHANNES VON RINTEN, ex-officer of the Prussian Guard, brought a tray of food into Fenton's cell and carefully closed the door. Fenton, sitting despondently upon his

three-legged stool, looked up and smiled.

"What was that new game you were going to teach me?" Johannes asked, peering from beneath his heavy brows. He liked talking to Fenton. Indeed, the Englishman was the only person to whom he could talk. All the other inhabitants of Zec merely shouted orders at

him, as if he were a dog.

"Game? Oh, that's quite easy to learn." Fenton knelt on the floor of the cell and smoothed out a patch of dust with his hand. "First of all the players have to agree on a certain place, a house, or a town or village. Then one player starts the game by asking his opponent to point out certain features, like the town hall, the market square, or the railway station. If he fails, then the person who asks the question wins a point. Understand?"

Johannes wrinkled his scowling face doubtfully. "I think so. Let's play."

"All right. What place shall we have?"

"Ippotousk," said Johannes. It was the only town he could remember, but every detail of it was burned into his poor muddled brain, for there he had spent some of the worst time of his War captivity.

"Never heard of it," replied Fenton. "I couldn't even start to play. Let's have this castle." He drew a large circle in the dust. "Look, here's the lake. This is the

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island. Now I'll begin by asking you a question. Where's my cell?"

"I know that one," chuckled Johannes, and jabbed his

finger on the extreme point of the island.

"Good! That's one to you." Fenton scratched J in the dust, and put a stroke after it. "Your turn to ask."

"Where's my room?"

Fenton shook his head and made a guess. Johannes

chuckled again.

"Nowhere near it. See, it is here." He drew a square at a little distance from Fenton's cell. "There is the passage which runs from this door past my room to the foot of the first staircase. I've won again."

"Quite right," said Fenton quietly, though he felt a thrill creep through him. His plan was working, and he had gained the first piece of knowledge he required. He added a second stroke after Johannes' initial and said, "Show me the main entrance."

"There," said Johannes, jabbing a thick forefinger in the dust.

Fenton pretended to peer at the plan. "I challenge that. If that's the foot of the first staircase, how can the main entrance be there?"

"Of course it is!" cried Johannes. "I'm not cheating! A corridor runs from the foot of the first staircase and branches into two. So." He ran a finger along the ground. "This way leads to the main gate, and that way to the inner courtyard."

"Inner courtyard?" Fenton queried.
"Ja. So." Again Johannes scrawled.

"Very well. Your turn to ask."

The German looked at Fenton cunningly. "Show me the boathouse where the launch is kept." He knew very well that Fenton had not been outside the castle since he was brought into it unconscious.



"Should be somewhere near the main gate," Fenton murmured. "There?"

"Not quite; more this way. But you can count that," Johannes said generously. "It was nearly right."

"Thanks. That makes me one and you three."

They played for a while longer, adding the kitchens, Malakoff's room where Fenton was tormented by the ceaseless reiteration of questions, and the old stables. Then Johannes suddenly remembered his duties, and, reluctantly departing, promised to continue the game later.

When the cell-door had shut Fenton remained staring at the marks in the dust. Before him he had a very fair plan of the castle, in so far as it contained the positions of certain features about which he had been ignorant. The route from his cell to the main gate was plainly marked. But there was something else to be added. He put in the corridor which led from Malakoff's room to the second staircase and, from the latter, the narrow passage to Martin Urquhart's cell. He had carefully observed the route when Malakoff had taken him to see Urquhart, and his photographic memory had retained the details. He stared hard at the plan, and fingered the beard which by this time was sprouting from his chin. Unless he was much mistaken he could reach the second staircase by proceeding along the corridor from his cell past the foot of the first staircase. He remembered that a dark passage joined the second staircase at a small landing about half-way down, which would be about the same level as his cell.

At last, convinced that he had got the lay-out as correctly as was possible in the circumstances, he committed the details to memory, and then obliterated the plan from the dust. To leave the marks that had been made upon the floor was too risky, for Malakoff might enter the cell at any moment, and though Johannes suspected

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nothing, the implication of the drawing would be only too obvious to the Russian.

But it was one thing to plan the route of his escape, and quite another to accomplish the venture. First of all he had to get out of his cell, and that was no easy matter. But there was a faint hope. During the last few days Fenton had studied the working of the lock very carefully, besides assiduously cultivating the friendship of Johannes, until much of the gaoler's suspicion had vanished.

Fenton had noticed that the lock was an old-fashioned and clumsy type, although perfectly sound and serviceable. It was, however, of the double-locking kind, and very often Johannes, whose slow brain had probably failed to observe this fact, did not give it the extra turn required. Of course, the door was perfectly secure, but it occurred to Fenton that if he could prevent the clumsy tongue from entering the socket, and Johannes again failed to give the second turn, he could walk out when he chose.

He examined the lock again, and then, with a knife taken from the tray Johannes had left, he sliced a piece of wood off the ancient bed which stood in a corner of the cell, and with great care began to carve it into a form of wedge which he hoped would prevent the tongue fitting securely into the socket. He was forced to abandon the attempt when Johannes came for the tray, but there were two more meals that day, each time the tray bore a knife, and so the wedge began to take shape rapidly. Over the last meal he worked rapidly, and Johannes had to wait while his prisoner finished his supper. The gaoler, however, was in a conversational mood and quite unsuspicious.

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But his placid attitude would have been badly shattered if he had been able to see through the cell-door. Directly he got outside and stopped to put down the

tray Fenton sprang across the floor and stood crouching tensely by the lock. The door was pulled shut, and he heard the rattle of Johannes' keys. Immediately he slipped the wooden wedge into position, holding it there with his fingers. The key was turned, the mechanism creaked, the tongue slid against the wedge and stopped. Fenton's heart almost did the same thing. If Johannes tried to double-lock the door the first move had failed. The bunch of keys rattled ominously, Johannes grunted, and seemed to have difficulty in extracting the key. Fenton held his breath. Then, with a sigh of intense relief, he heard Johannes withdraw the key, and the crockery upon the tray rattled as he walked away down the corridor.

Fenton was surprised to find himself trembling as he walked back to the stool and sat down. He was sorely tempted to leave the cell immediately in case Johannes should for some reason return, or Malakoff pay him a surprise visit. But he resisted the temptation, and waited in the silent darkness until he judged that the occupants of Zec were asleep.

At last he rose, braced himself, and picked up his three-legged stool, the only weapon he possessed. Fervently hoping the tongue of the lock would not slide right through its travel, he coaxed out the wedge, pulling gently at the door meanwhile, until, with a slight creak which sent his heart into his mouth, it swung open. He slipped out into the stone passage, which was illuminated only by a small oil-lamp near the foot of the first staircase. Somewhere there too was Johannes' room, if the plan which had been drawn on the cell-floor was correct.

Fenton paused at a door beneath the oil-lamp, and the intense silence was broken only by the stertorous breathing of some one in the room beyond. He turned the handle gently. The dim light of the lamp coming

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through the open door revealed Johannes in bed on his back, with his mouth wide open. The coveted keys, without which Fenton could do nothing, hung upon a hook close by. Fenton's fingers had almost closed upon them when that instinct which those who have spent much of their lives on active service and in adventure possess must have warned Johannes that danger was at hand. The heavy breathing ceased, his mouth shut, and his eyes opened.

Fenton wheeled with stool upraised. He saw Johannes' mouth begin to open again. The stool descended with a sickening thud across the recumbent man's forehead, and a tiny stream of blood stained the brown

skin.

"Poor devil!" Fenton murmured, looking down at the unconscious man. "I didn't want to do that."

Swiftly he searched the room, found some cord, bound Johannes to the bed, after pinioning his hands and feet, and gagged him with part of his own shirt. Then, taking the keys and an electric torch, he closed the door quietly. He stole along the passage, past the foot of the first staircase, by which he used to ascend to Malakoff's room, until he came to a corridor that led away to the right. He turned down this, and, as he expected, found himself on the landing half-way down the second staircase.

He listened. No sound, save the fierce pumping of his own heart, disturbed the uncanny silence of the castle. The darkness was intense, for there were no lamps here, and seemed to press on him suffocatingly, so that he wanted to push it away with his hands. He switched on the torch, and gingerly descended the stairs until he came to the narrow passage which led to Urquhart's cell.

It had occurred to Fenton to make his escape alone, but somehow he did not relish the idea of abandoning

a fellow-countryman when there was a chance of rescuing him. Besides, he had given Catherine a promise, and if he himself reached safety without Urquhart he would never be able to face her.

He reached a locked door and, after trying several keys, opened it. A little way beyond lay Urquhart's cell. Five keys were tried before the door yielded. The beam of the torch moved questingly before it disclosed the wretched man huddled on some filthy rags in a corner. The stench which smote Fenton's nostrils was almost unbearable as he bent down and gently shook him.

Urquhart opened his eyes, stared, and then cringed away in terror. With his long hair and beard he looked more like a beast of the jungle than a human

being.

"It's all right," whispered Fenton. "I am a friend. Come with me, and I will get you out of this place." He took Urquhart's hand, shook it warmly, and smiled encouragingly. Gradually the deranged mind grasped the fact that this was not one of Malakoff's diabolical tricks, and after a time Urquhart showed that he was

willing to follow his rescuer.

Fenton was obliged to abandon his stool, for Urquhart insisted on holding his hand, and he required his other for the torch. He retraced his steps. It was slow work, for continually he was forced to stop and reassure Urquhart that everything was all right. At long last, with the brooding silence of the castle unbroken by anything except the subdued sound of their breathing and the faint noise of their feet upon the paved corridors, they reached the main entrance.

The massive, iron-studded doors were locked and bolted, but in one of them was situated a smaller door for general use. A further trial of keys ensued, while Urquhart stood by Fenton's side. To the latter's dismay his charge had begun to mutter to himself in a low

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voice, and, in spite of admonition, refused to keep quiet. At length the door swung open. Fenton passed through,

and drew the shambling Urquhart after him.

Now that they were out in the open air the darkness was not so intense. They stood motionless for a moment while Fenton surveyed the ground before them. The land sloped rapidly down to the lakeside, and he could just distinguish in the faint light the lines of the jetty and, beyond it, the low ridge of the boathouse roof where the launch was kept. The distance was no more than a couple of hundred yards. Two hundred yards to freedom!

Carefully he closed the door behind him, lest a stray breath of wind should bang it and rouse some light sleeper from his rest. His grip tightened on Urquhart's hand. The poor fellow had ceased to mutter and was standing with his head bowed upon his chest, his forehead furrowed with anxious thought, as if he was trying to remember something. Above them towered the massive walls of Zec, and there was no sound save the faint whispering of the wind among the pines, where an owl hooted mournfully thrice.

"Come," whispered Fenton to Urquhart. "Move

quietly, and we shall soon be clear."

He moved forward, but Urquhart obstinately refused to follow. He still appeared to be thinking deeply.

"Come along," Fenton coaxed. "We have not much

time."

Urquhart raised his bearded face, crowned by its mop of tangled red hair. "No!" he cried in a loud voice. "I must go back and fetch it! I can't go without it!"

"Ssh!" hissed Fenton. "We shall be heard. You can do without it, whatever it is."

"I cannot," Urquhart replied in a lower key. "I cannot go without my mouse."

"I'll get you another one," said Fenton urgently. "We dare not wait any longer." He tugged at Urquhart's hand.

But Urquhart would not move. "I won't go. I want my mouse. I will not leave it to Malakoff; he'll kill it. It would take food from my hand. Yes," he cried de-

cisively, "I must go back for it."

Urquhart's voice was rising, and in desperation Fenton clapped a hand over his mouth. Immediately Urquhart began to fight like a demon. In a trice he had got his head free, and, poor madman that he was, screamed at the top of his voice. Whereupon Fenton, reduced to drastic remedies, hit him a cracking blow under the jaw. Urquhart fell senseless.

Fenton paused and listened with heaving chest. From somewhere above and to his left he heard the rattle of an iron window being flung open and voices shouting hoarsely. If he was to get clear there was not a moment to lose. Confound Urquhart and his mouse! He stooped and heaved the unconscious man on to his shoulders. Then he began to stumble down the slope towards the boathouse.

But it was too late. From the wall above voices and a command rang out. The beam of a small searchlight lit up Fenton and his burden. He ignored an order to halt and staggered on. Then suddenly from two sides came the stuttering rattle of sub-machine-guns. The bullets whistled past Fenton and ploughed up the ground just beyond him. In the glare of the searchlight he could see the turf being cut into an arrow-shaped groove, for there was a gun on either side.

To cross that line was certain death, and he was hemmed in on each side by a stream of bullets. It occurred to him that if the marksmen wished to kill him they could do so in a fraction of a second, but they only wanted to prevent his escape. Still in the full glare

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of the light, he turned and ran back towards the castle, thinking that the guns could not be deflected sufficiently to prevent him creeping along the base of the wall. As he ran the bullets churned up the ground at his side.

He had no chance to test his second theory, for as he reached the castle again the bolts of the great doors were drawn back with a hoarse screeching, and a flood of men poured out towards him. Fenton dropped Urquhart unceremoniously, and, as the first fellow came for him with a weapon like a policeman's truncheon, he side-stepped and landed his attacker a beautiful left hook which floored him completely. The next instant several men leaped at Fenton, and he went down beneath their combined weight, hit, it seemed, in a dozen places at once. When they were sure that he could resist no longer they dragged him back into the castle. Inside the great doors he came face to face with Malakoff.

"So you've returned," said the Russian quietly. "An ingenious attempt, upon which I must congratulate you. I am afraid I underestimated your capabilities. How you contrived it I don't know, but I shall find out, so that you will not be able to repeat it. In the meantime your offence cannot go unpunished."

Thus it was that presently Fenton, bruised and aching all over his body, found himself in a tiny cell, compared with which his previous prison had been palatial. The roof was so low that he could stand only by bending his head, and the width was such that nowhere could he stretch his arms out fully. The small, narrow window, a few inches wide, looked out on to the lake, and occasionally water splashed through on to the floor. The dampness stood out on the stonework like green mould on cheese. His bed was a board eighteen inches wide, without even a blanket to soften it.

He sat down and buried his head in his hands. The

attempt had failed. He would not get a second chance. Yet he was convinced that but for Urquhart's insane desire to return and fetch his mouse they would have got away. He wondered vaguely what Malakoff had in store for him now.

CHAPTER XIX

Sign, You English Swine!

At one side of the long table in Malakoff's room on the first floor of the Castle of Zec sat Konrad and Josef Markevicius. A pile of cigarette-ends in an ash-tray told their own story almost as eloquently as the dejected figure which, with bowed head and hunched shoulders, sat opposite. For eight long, weary hours Fenton had been questioned first by Malakoff, then by Konrad, and finally by Markevicius. For the last two hours he had been forced to face Konrad and Markevicius together, and he was at the end of his tether.

Close confinement in his narrow cell, rich food—so different from his earlier diet—and no exercise had produced restless nights and acute indigestion. When he did manage to fall asleep for an hour or two he was tormented by terrifying nightmares, from which he awoke trembling and sweating. He knew, too, that Malakoff, remembering that he had once confessed during the course of a conversation in Wilno to a fear of confined spaces, had deliberately kept him in this narrow cell in order to play upon his dread of this particular form of claustrophobia. Fenton had fought against his fear more or less successfully, but it had cost him a tremendous effort. This and the relentless questioning to which he had been subjected, together with the deterioration of his health and the growing belief that any attempt at his rescue must have failed, had almost reduced him to utter despair. Only the English dislike of admitting defeat, especially to a man like Malakoff, allowed him to remain defiant. But it was a very feeble defiance, something akin to a crippled

octogenarian disputing a right of way with a heavy-

weight boxer.

Once more, in cold, automatic tones, Konrad asked the question which had been hammered into Fenton's brain for the last two hours. Fenton's head dropped upon his chest, and he did not answer, whereupon Johannes, stationed behind his chair, jerked his head back by the simple process of catching hold of his fair hair. Johannes had not been quite so friendly towards Fenton since the night when Fenton had bound and gagged him as a prelude to the attempt to escape.

Fenton was vastly changed from the spruce young man who had been Vice-Consul at Wilno. His hair was long, and a fair beard and moustache made him look like a tramp, though no tramp possessed quite that strained and exhausted expression. His face was lined, and his eyes, over which the lids drooped through sheer weariness, had sunk back into their sockets. His head rolled drunkenly on his shoulders under the grasp of Johannes. To many he would have been an object of pity, but the mask-like faces of the two men opposite were expressionless, and their eyes were hard and cruel. Again Konrad repeated the question.

"If you question me until I go mad," whispered Fenton, looking at them through half-closed lids, "I shall not answer. And if I do go mad and answer you won't know whether I'm speaking the truth or not."

Markevicius was on the point of taking up the interrogation when Malakoff entered the room, followed by

Wilenski, carrying a sheet of paper.

"All right," said Malakoff crisply. "Leave him alone. I've got another proposition to put before him." He went to a cupboard and poured some liquid into a glass, which he handed to Johannes. "Give him that," he ordered.

Fenton had no idea what the liquid was. He sipped it mechanically, not caring very much if Malakoff

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poisoned him. He could taste nothing, for with the stomach disorder brought about by the rich food he had been forced to eat and the fact that he had been unable to clean his teeth properly for some time, his mouth was in an appalling condition. As he swallowed he felt a burning sensation in his throat, but in a few minutes he was surprised to find that his exhaustion had vanished, and that, though still weak, he was alert mentally.

After watching him for a moment Malakoff sat down between Konrad and Markevicius, with Wilenski on the latter's right. The piercing eyes fixed themselves on

Fenton's worn face.

"Do you remember, Mr Fenton," Malakoff began, with exaggerated politeness, "how a little while ago we visited the man who was your predecessor at Wilno? You remember, too, I have no doubt, the sad condition in which we found him?"

"I do," said Fenton brusquely. "You had sent him mad."

Malakoff took a paper from Wilenski, glanced at it, and said in a voice which was threatening despite its softness, "You have no wish to become like Martin Urquhart?"

"I can certainly think of a more pleasant future."

"In that case you would be well advised to sign this document."

"I am not signing anything, unless it's your death warrant," Fenton retorted, with a flash of his old spirit.

"I'd do that with pleasure."

"Let me beg you to think for a moment," Malakoff said in the same quiet voice. "Just consider Urquhart's condition. Insane. A human being deprived of everything which goes to make life tolerable. Do you wish to become like that? I warn you that even now you are not far from the borderline. I know the signs, for I have dealt with these things before."

"In Russia, I suppose?" Fenton suggested.

"That does not enter into our discussion. Here is the document. Read it, and remember, before you refuse to

sign, the sad state of Martin Urquhart."

Fenton took the paper which the Russian held out. The eyes of the four men watched him like the hard, bright eyes of four snakes. The silence in the room was

profound.

The document was typewritten in English, and was in the form of a confidential report to the British Ambassador in Warsaw from the British Vice-Consul at Wilno. It contained a statement purporting to be the result of certain investigations made by the Vice-Consul. Definite proof had been obtained by him that the Polish Government, acting under the cloak of secrecy and subterfuge, and disguising their actions by organizing sub rosa a society called the Society of the Herons, was about to enter upon a war of aggression against the neighbouring country of Lithuania. The incident designed to lead to this conflict would make it appear that Lithuanians living near the frontier had raided a Polish village and abducted a number of women. This would be followed by a Polish peasant, ostensibly maddened by the violation of his daughter, shooting a Lithuanian frontier guard as an act of retaliation. Other Poles would be likely to follow his example. The statement concluded:

It is my duty to inform your Excellency as to this plot, which is certainly of Polish origin. The object is primarily to afford Poland an excuse for attacking Lithuania. It seems probable that certain nations with totalitarian tendencies might go to the assistance of Poland, because the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would feel obliged to protect the interests of Lithuania. France and England might be unavoidably drawn into the ensuing conflict. If, however, the true facts are known beforehand, then Poland's excuse for the contem-

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plated act of aggression can be counteracted before it is advanced.

My information leads me to believe that the act of aggression will take place in the region of —— on ——.

"You will observe," commented Malakoff suavely, when Fenton looked up from reading the document, "that the date is left out. That and the locality will be filled in directly you have signed, and I will see that the report reaches your very excellent Lord Braxted."

In silence Fenton read through the document again, and then pretended to do so a third time, though on this occasion he was trying to think what use it could be to Malakoff and the Herons. Practically, the report amounted to an accusation against Poland, charging her with an act of aggression against Lithuania, following a faked frontier incident. For the first time Fenton knew how the plot, which he had long suspected, was going to be worked.

Fenton remembered that Malakoff was Russian, and that his real name was Kaplov. Was he in Russian employ? Beyond that forbidden frontier, in that land which had grown almost as mysterious as Tibet, so numerous were its secrets, was some plot being matured by which the Red Bear might move into a more strategic position in Western Europe? For if Russia came to the aid of Lithuania and was victorious, would she not expect some territorial reward in Poland which would bring her closer to the new German district formerly in Czechoslovakia and make her approach to the now Germanized Austria much easier? It seemed to Fenton that Russia was the only country likely to make anything out of trouble between Poland and Lithuania.

The object of Malakoff in asking him to sign the document was, he assumed, to provide additional evidence of Poland's guilt.

"Well?" demanded the Russian as Fenton put the paper on the table.

"I won't sign."

Malakoff's lips set in a thin line, and he caressed his grey tobacco-stained moustache with long fingers. His blue eyes glinted evilly. "Remember Urquhart," he said softly.

"What do I get if I do sign?" demanded Fenton.

"Better treatment and subsequent release," Malakoff answered.

"You aren't very liberal with your rewards, are you? Besides, I don't believe you. You aren't going to allow me to turn up in Warsaw and expose the document as a fraud."

"It won't be a fraud by then." Malakoff gave a cold smile, with no mirth in it.

"If I tell them that Russia instigated the plot?"

"Who would believe you? Russia would by then have come to the aid of Lithuania, and would be fighting in a righteous cause. Nothing that you could say would make any difference. Oh, yes, we'll release you." And again Malakoff smiled.

Fenton shook his head. "No," he said firmly, and

Malakoff glanced at his wrist-watch.

"You've not much time," he warned. "The drug I

gave you will not last long. Remember Urquhart."

Fenton remembered Urquhart only too vividly. He also thought of Stella and Peter, and Catherine and Sir George Fawley. By now he was convinced that his position was hopeless. Somehow his instructions to Catherine must have miscarried. He was powerless to help himself, and no longer could he count on outside assistance. He would never see Stella or Peter again. The thought almost unmanned him, weak as he was. For their sakes he would have signed the document, trusting to get out of the difficulty later, if he could have believed

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Malakoff. But he could read his death sentence in the Russian's cold stare.

"No," he said again.

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Wilenski rose, came round the table, and stood before Fenton. "Sign, you English swine!" he snarled, and hit

Fenton as hard as he could with a swinging fist.

Instinctively Fenton struggled to rise, but Johannes held him down in the chair. Fenton looked at Wilenski contemptuously. "You're a brave man, Frantisek," he said. "If Johannes let me go you'd run like a rabbit. I remember you telling me once that you were a patriotic Pole. Instead I find you a despicable traitor. I suppose you're getting well paid for this?"
"Will you sign?" shouted Wilenski furiously.

"Yes," Fenton said suddenly, "if Malakoff will let

us fight it out with bare hands here and now."

Wilenski paled quickly and cast an anxious look at the Russian, as if he feared he might agree. But Malakoff remained impassive, and after kicking Fenton on the shins until he gasped with pain Wilenski returned to his

"Always the little gentleman," said Fenton through

white lips.

Malakoff again looked at his watch, and was about to speak when he stiffened in his chair and listened. Through the open window came the throb of an aeroplane engine, and the rapidity with which the sound increased in volume indicated that the machine was flying very low and approaching rapidly.

The four men at the table exchanged glances. Then with one accord they rose and went to the window. With a reverberating roar the aeroplane swept overhead, and Fenton, from his position in the chair, saw it skim

out across the lake and bank steeply.

"It had Polish markings," said Konrad in a low voice.

"Yes, an Army machine," agreed Markevicius.

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Malakoff did not speak, but stood by the window, waiting. The noise of the powerful engine increased again, and once more the aeroplane flew over Zec. Then it turned, circled twice over the island, and flew off. The roar of the engine died away, and there was an uncanny silence as Malakoff returned to the table. His face was expressionless, but the other three men looked anxious.

A sudden fierce hope surged up within Fenton as Malakoff stared at him.

"Fenton, you will sign this now," he commanded.

But a liveliness which he had not experienced for some time had taken possession of Fenton. He shook his head. "Oh, no, my dear Kaplov! There is nothing doing. You didn't like the sound of that aeroplane, did you? You're not quite so sure that your beautiful little plot is going to succeed——"

"All the more reason why you should sign," snapped Wilenski, spitting the words out venomously through

tightly drawn lips.

"Don't interrupt your betters, you rude little boy," reproved Fenton, and Wilenski scowled with furious hatred. "As I was saying, it seems as if your plot has been scotched."

Malakoff shook his head. "Not at all. It has matured so far that nothing can stop its ultimate development. You deceive yourself, Fenton. There is no hope of your being rescued, and we haven't even begun to—er—persuade you yet. Why not accept our offer?"

"Persuade and be damned to you!" Fenton cried.

"You're beaten, and you know it."

"I am afraid the boot is on the other leg. Sign now before it is too late."

A queer feeling of faintness was creeping over Fenton, but he shook his head defiantly. The four men opposite became suddenly blurred and indistinct. His muscles

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relaxed, and his head drooped. Vaguely he heard Mala-

koff's voice coming from a great distance.

"Take him back to his cell, Johannes. He's no good now until he has revived of his own accord. That drug

only works for a limited time."

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Fenton, as near unconsciousness as a man could be without actually losing his senses, was picked up and slung like a sack of corn over Johannes' broad shoulders. But he was not so far gone that he failed to hear Malakoff say to the others, "That aeroplane; I do not like it. Whatever happens we must strike by the 5th of next month. My superiors are already impatient of delay, and they are not disposed to grant a further extension of time."

Malakoff and his confederates were not the only people who had discovered the manœuvres of the aeroplane with apprehension. At the edge of the forest, whence they could command a good view of the castle, Stella and Catherine had noted its flight with dismay. Both women were feeling despondent, for in spite of all their efforts Zec remained impregnable. Twice more Stella had swum out to the island in an attempt to get into touch with Lawrie, and twice she had failed. For Fenton, exhausted by the treatment he had received, had failed to hear the quiet voice of Stella calling from the far side of the thick stone walls. And Stella had not dared to call too loudly, for fear of being heard by the wrong person. Their attempt to steal a boat from the village had also failed. The dogs of the hamlet had proved to be too alert, and the two women had retired in some confusion to the shelter of the forest.

As the aeroplane vanished beyond the tree-clad hills Stella gripped her companion's hand. "That must be Gustav's men," she said, and stared at the castle in miserable silence.

"Perhaps it was merely a coincidence," Catherine re-

plied, but her voice lacked conviction.

"If Gustav has found the headquarters of the Herons and strikes before we can intervene—" Stella did not finish her sentence.

"We must find him and discover what he intends to

" And then?"

"If it means danger to our men, prevent him," re-

plied Catherine almost fiercely.

Stella lowered the glasses through which she had been watching the castle. "That's not going to be easy in these thick woods. He might be anywhere round the circumference of the lake."

"We must keep a careful watch," said Catherine.

"Perhaps we shall see some movement along the shore, or the smoke of a fire."

All day long, taking it in turns to rest, Catherine and Stella kept observation upon the lake and the castle, but it was not until late in the afternoon that they had their reward. The barking of dogs drew their attention to the hamlet, and they saw that two men were putting out in a small rowing-boat. Stella focused her glasses, stared a moment, and then said quietly, "We were right. One of them is Gustav Kovel."

Slowly, like some huge water-beetle, the boat crept across the sunbathed waters of the lake towards the castle. As it approached the jetty, however, Johannes came down from the gates, accompanied by Konrad. The boat stopped, and, though the two women could not hear what was being said, it was obvious that an altercation was in progress. Gustav was standing up in the stern of the boat, while his companion rested upon the oars. After some minutes the sound of two pistol-shots echoed sharply in the evening stillness. The oarsman became suddenly active, Gustav sat down abruptly, and

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the boat moved out of range. Johannes and Konrad stood watching for a while, and then returned to the castle.

The rowing-boat did not come back to the village, but made for a small sandy bay about a mile distant. Gustav and his companion landed, pulled the boat up the beach, and vanished into the undergrowth.

Stella looked at Catherine meaningly, and then glanced towards the boat. "If only we could get that boat——"

"When darkness falls," said Catherine.

They waited impatiently while the sun moved slowly towards the horizon. As soon as it was dark they began to move through the forest towards the place where the boat still lay upon the sand. By this time they had a pretty good idea of the direction of the forest paths in their immediate neighbourhood, and when the last glimmer of light had faded they crept cautiously down towards the margin of the lake.

Presently they could make out the dark shape of the boat, and Stella put her lips to Catherine's ear. "What has become of Kovel?" she whispered. "We've not seen

or heard a sign of him since we saw him land."

"Perhaps they've gone."

"Then why didn't they take the boat back to the village? And if they wanted to leave it here, why haven't they guarded it?"

"I can't answer your conundrums," replied Catherine.

"Anyway, what does it matter? Let's take the boat and

get out to the castle."

With redoubled care they crept on, pausing to listen every few yards, and peering into the darkness in every direction. Some instinct warned Stella that all was not well, yet there was no audible or visible proof, and, thinking she was becoming a victim of nerves, she did her best to stifle her presentiment.

It was not until they rose slowly to their feet by the

side of the boat that her fears were confirmed. Then, without a sound, they found themselves enveloped in a blinding flood of light. For a moment they stood motionless, dazed and dazzled, until a cold voice out of the darkness said:

"Put up your hands!"

CHAPTER XX

We Must Make Our Effort To-night

MALAKOFF, alias Kaplov, swept up the papers from the table and carried them to a safe set in the thick stone wall of the castle and concealed by a wooden cupboard. He closed the heavy steel door, locked it, and slipped the bunch of keys into a pocket of his monk's robe.

"That is our only course," he said, turning to his confederates, who sat at the long table staring moodily before them. "Indeed, I think it is our best one." He paused, but as none of his companions spoke he continued sharply, "Come, come! There is nothing to be unduly worried about. It was certainly disturbing before, when we could not be sure what Kovel was doing or where he was, but now that we know he is squatting out there among the trees, why, there is little that need trouble us."

He stood by the table, fingering his tobacco-stained moustache, his keen eyes flickering from one to another of the gloomy faces.

"You think we shall succeed after all?" muttered

Wilenski dubiously.

"What can stop us? Certainly not Kovel."

"Why are you so sure?" Markevicius demanded.

Malakoff sighed. More than once he had found his companions singularly slow to appreciate his line of reasoning. "We may take it for granted," he said patiently, "that Kovel now knows that this is the head-quarters of the Herons. That was him in the rowing-boat right enough. For weeks he has been searching all Poland for us, and do you think he's going to

leave us now that he has found us? It's not likely, is it?"

Markevicius agreed.

"Very well," Malakoff continued. "So long as I remain here Kovel will sit among the trees waiting. I'll take care to give him plenty of evidence that I am still in residence. Now you, Markevicius, accompanied by Konrad, will slip away before dawn—Johannes will row you over in the dinghy—and you will make your way to Karas's hut. You know where there is a car waiting, but take care, because Kovel may have blocked the roads, or have them watched."

"He's likely to have this castle watched, too," said

Konrad. "How are we going to get through?"

"On your bellies, if need be!" shouted Malakoff suddenly, thumping the table with his fist. Lenin, am I dealing with men or children? You will have no difficulty so long as you are reasonably careful. I have told you that there are no troops or police in the neighbourhood. Do you think Kovel would hesitate for one moment if there were? No, he's waiting until reinforcements come up, and until they do he cannot move. That's why I am staying here—to keep him immobilized. In the meantime you will direct the plan in accordance with my instructions. To-day is the 3rd of the month. Just before dawn to-morrow you will go ashore. By evening on the 4th you will be at Karas's hut, near the frontier, and on the 5th Kovel will suddenly find that the plot, which he is now flattering himself he has frustrated, has flared up behind him. I'm afraid he will be a very surprised and disappointed man, for he will then be unable to do anything. You are all aware that it only needs a match to set this powder magazine alight, and this is something considerably more dangerous than a mere match."

Wilenski nodded his scrubby head and turned his

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large, round lenses from their contemplation of the table-top towards Malakoff. "And what do we do?"

he asked mildly.

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"We must watch carefully for the arrival of Kovel's men. When that happens, or on the night of the 4th, whichever may come first, we leave Zec, so that when Kovel enters he will find that the important capture he hoped to effect is impossible. He dare not make any attempt to enter before he has help, and when that arrives it will be too late."

"What are you going to do with Fenton and Urquhart?" asked Markevicius.

Malakoff took a crumpled packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one thoughtfully. "I am not quite sure. I do not think we can do anything with Urquhart, but Fenton is different. He might prove useful in the future."

"Shoot the swine and leave him for Kovel to find," snarled Wilenski.

Malakoff watched the cigarette smoke slowly ascending. "No. That would be waste. As I said, he may be useful either to bargain with or to experiment upon. With a little persuasion he might be made to tell us some interesting things. It is extraordinary," he added, in a contemplative tone, "how even very obstinate people can be made to realize their past errors. There have been several instances recently in Russia of prominent workers for the State eagerly acknowledging their—er—indiscretions. No; I think when we go, Wilenski, we will take our friend with us."

"I shall be happy to look after him," muttered the Pole. "I never hated a man as I hate Fenton."

Konrad glanced at him and grinned. "That's only because he fooled you. He's a cleverer man than you'll ever be."

Wilenski scowled and did not answer.

"Well," said Malakoff, "I think that is all we need discuss. You two "—he nodded at Konrad and Markevicius—" will be well advised to get some rest. You'll have a hard day to-morrow. I will see that you are called at half-past one. That will give you time for some food before you leave."

Konrad and Markevicius rose, and as they reached the door Malakoff called out, "By the way, tell Johannes to see that the rowlocks of the dinghy are well greased, and he had better wrap some cloth round the parcelling of the oars. You don't want to advertise

your departure."

But, although it was quite unknown to Malakoff, there was another boat upon the lake which wanted neither its departure, progress, nor arrival advertised. About the time Johannes pushed the dinghy clear of the boathouse, with Konrad and Markevicius squeezed into the stern, Catherine and Stella, by muscular efforts of which they would not have believed themselves cap-

able, got Kovel's boat into the water.

When Kovel had flashed his torch on them they had both imagined that the game was up. But though Gustav was surprised to see them, it was plain that his mind was occupied with other matters. He chided Stella for leaving Wilno without warning him, but she explained that she had been tired of doing nothing, had met Catherine, and had continued to search for the headquarters of the Herons. Kovel admitted that Catherine's message from Fenton had been passed on to him, and he seemed to regard her in a friendly manner, but his answers to Stella's questions were brief and far from illuminating.

Stella conducted the whole of the conversation, while Catherine sat silently in the darkness. Some of the things which Stella said surprised her. For Stella gave no hint that the Castle of Zec held any interest for

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either of them, nor did she mention that Lawrie had been seen at the window of his cell. She contrived to give the impression that she and Catherine had only lately arrived in the neighbourhood. She did not refer to the aeroplane, nor admit that she had seen Kovel in the boat; but she flattered him assiduously, making it plain that she was overjoyed to fall in with him, feeling sure that Lawrie would soon be safe.

Gustav Kovel, thankful that the darkness concealed his features, answered her questions in monosyllables. He had been suspicious when first he had surprised the two women, but later reflection assured him that they could not have accomplished anything unaided. It was quite by chance, no doubt, that they had found their way to Zec, about which apparently they were unsus-Had Kovel been less preoccupied with the future he might have detected Stella's subterfuge; but already he had a considerable load on his mind, and he did not feel disposed to worry overmuch about two apparently harmless women. Such was his vanity that he felt sure that if Stella had succeeded in gleaning any information she would certainly have told him. Like a good many other young men, Gustav Kovel was a poor judge of women, but he was much relieved that Stella did not question him unduly about her husband. He was reasonably sure that Fenton was in Zec, but, aware of the plans he had made—his companion had gone to the nearest telephone to get into communication with the military authorities—it was best that she should remain ignorant of the fact.

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He was firmly resolved to pack both women off in the morning, but in the meantime he could do nothing more than suggest that they should get what rest they could. He left them by the boat while, with some delicacy of feeling, he went farther into the forest before lying down.

No sooner were they alone than Catherine whispered to Stella, "Why did you pretend we knew nothing about the castle?"

"Because I don't trust him," replied Stella in a low voice. "From something he said to me in Wilno I feel sure that he would take care that we could not interfere with his plans." She leaned nearer to Catherine and said with a fierce intensity, "We must make our effort to-night in that boat—and we must not fail."

Thus it was that in due course the two women got the boat afloat, and with slow, careful strokes Stella began to row towards the castle. But the craft was of heavy construction, very different from the light dinghy which Johannes was propelling with short, powerful strokes of the sculls. Stella found it hard work, and more than once paused for breath. Her hands felt hot, and there were blisters forming where the rough wood had rasped her soft skin.

During one of these pauses, while they were still some way from the castle, Catherine, who was steering, leaned forward and whispered, "Listen! Can you hear any-

thing?"

Stella rested upon her oars. The boat floated motionless upon the calm surface of the lake. There was no wind, and because of the thick, heavy clouds which covered the sky the darkness was intense. On land it had been difficult to see more than a yard or two, but out on the water, away from the shadow of the trees, there was a faint sheen which gave a little light. From the forest an owl hooted twice mournfully, and a restless water-fowl in the reeds gave answer in anxious, querying tones. Then silence fell again, and Stella could hear nothing save the violent pumping of her own heart.

And then, as she was about to speak to Catherine, a faint 'shush' reached her straining ears. The sound, which was repeated, came from farther out on the lake.

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If Johannes had been a sailor he would have realized that a dinghy with three heavy men in it is apt to make a considerable bow-wave when forced through the water. It was the noise of this wave which Catherine's quick ears had detected. Johannes should have sculled gently if he wished the progress of his craft to be silent.

Stella and Catherine, now aware that they were not the only people afloat, tried to pierce the darkness in the direction from which the sound came. Catherine lay on the bottom boards, with her eyes just above the gunnel, in an attempt to get the approaching boat silhouetted against the faint demarcation of the skyline. At first all she could detect was the squat immensity of Zec, and then when the dinghy no longer had the island as a background she saw suddenly the dark form of the craft moving towards the shore. Her heart beat violently, for the boat was very near, and she could not be certain whether it was approaching them or not.

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She put out a hand and pressed Stella's ankle as a warning for her to keep silent. The dinghy surged on, and presently it was near enough for Catherine to see the faint white blur which appeared every now and again at the bows. Very carefully she took a firm grip of her pistol. She had no idea who the three men in the dinghy might be, but since they were coming from the direction of Zec it seemed more than probable that they were enemies.

By this time it was fairly obvious that the dinghy's course would take her far closer to Stella and Catherine than was comfortable. It seemed certain that if the occupants of the boat were using their eyes at all they must detect the other boat lying motionless a few yards away. But the dinghy ploughed on, driven by the powerful arms of Johannes, and no hoarse challenge rang out across the quiet water. Gradually the danger

of discovery became less likely as the dinghy drew away towards the land, and presently, when the 'shushshush' of the bow-wave had faded into silence, Catherine urged her companion to row as quickly and

quietly as possible towards the castle.

Though they were unaware of it, the two women had been saved from discovery by the fact that behind them the dark, tree-clad slopes of the hills rose abruptly from the water, and their motionless craft had been indistinguishable. It was a matter of light and shade. The dinghy had passed across what little light there was, while Catherine and Stella had been hidden against the dark obscurity of the steeply rising land.

When they reached the jetty Stella was almost exhausted. The castle was in darkness, except for a faint yellow glow coming from the windows of a room above the main entrance. The doors at each end of the boat-

house stood open.

They contrived to pull their boat behind an overhanging bush, which partly concealed it from anyone looking from the direction of the castle or boathouse, and then, after listening for a while, they set out to cover the two hundred yards of open ground which lay between them and the main entrance to Zec. They hoped that the door might have been left, if not open, at least unlocked for the man who was to bring back the dinghy.

In order to avoid detection they worked their way up the slope by different routes, meeting at the huge ironstudded doors. But there a bitter wave of disappointment swept over them. The entrance was securely fastened, and even the small wicket-door was locked.

"Whoever returns will probably have a key," whis-

pered Stella. "Let's get back to the boathouse."

"But if no one comes back till daylight?" Catherine suggested.

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"We must find some other means of getting in before then, but it is worth waiting for a little while in order to get a key."

Catherine saw the point of this argument. A quiet entry by means of a key would be far less likely to attract attention than if they attempted to force a door or window.

They went back to the boathouse, but the interior was bare of everything except the motor-boat. There was no room to conceal themselves on the narrow stone landing-stage, the jetty was too open and obvious, so finally they compromised by standing against the wall of the boathouse, with the wooden structure between them and the castle.

A little wind got up and blew gently about them, ruffling the fair curls which had escaped from beneath Stella's hat. A bird called tentatively in the pine-trees and fell silent again. Soon a faint lightening in the eastern horizon showed that the dawn was not far away. Catherine nudged Stella.

"We must move in a few minutes. We shall not be

able to cross that open ground in daylight."

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Stella nodded, and the next instant clutched at her companion's arm. The faint noise of a splash broke the silence. They waited tensely. A few minutes later there could no longer be any doubt that the dinghy was returning. Peering round the side of the boathouse, Stella saw Johannes ship his sculls and run gently into the dark interior alongside the motor-boat. By signs the two women agreed what to do, and then they stood one on each side of the door through which Johannes must pass. They could hear him grunting as he stooped to tie the dinghy's painter, and a sudden doubt came into Stella's mind. Supposing he had no key? Supposing he was admitted by some one inside the castle? She had no opportunity to pursue this

unpleasant thought further, for she heard the scrape of his boots on the stone steps which led up to the door. She took a firm grip of the barrel of her automatic, glanced swiftly at Catherine, and then fixed her gaze on the door.

When it opened the unsuspecting Johannes stepped out. He was carrying an electric torch, the light from which he shone on the ground a few feet ahead of him. Quite naturally his gaze was concentrated on that illuminated circle, and he never saw the two silent and motionless figures on either side. Then, as he turned to close the door, the beam from the torch swung round and lit up Stella's feet and ankles. Johannes paused in utter astonishment, and as he raised the torch Catherine's arm descended.

The heavy butt of the automatic struck Johannes on the back of the head. With a peculiar, throaty gasp he fell forward, thrusting Stella against the side of the boathouse. For an instant she struggled to defend herself. Then, as he slid to the ground, she realized that he was unconscious.

It had been arranged that Catherine should strike the blow unless Johannes happened to turn towards her, and Stella felt glad that it was so. She stared at the inert figure, and a faint trembling ran up the backs of her legs.

"Do you think he's dead?" she asked.

"I don't care," said Catherine fiercely. "I'll gladly kill six like him if only I can free Martin." She stooped and turned Johannes on his back. "He's an unpleasant brute. Ah! Look, Stella, keys!"

Quickly she slipped the heavy bunch from Johannes' belt, while Stella picked up the torch. Between them they dragged the inert figure into the boathouse and shut the door. By now the eastern sky was perceptibly lighter, and they hurried across the open ground to-

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wards the castle. It was Stella who took the keys. Lawrie had told her a good deal about keys and locks, and almost at a glance, taking care that the bunch did not click noisily in her fingers, she was able to decide which were likely to fit the small door. At the fourth attempt the lock grated open, and when distant objects were standing out clearly in the rapidly strengthening light of the dawn the two women slipped into the Castle of Zec. They closed the door behind them, but did not lock it, for the grating of the wards had seemed uncomfortably loud.

They peered round uncertainly in the dim light shed by an oil-lamp. The hall seemed full of shadows, but no hoarse challenge rang out, as they had half expected. When discussing their plans they had decided to make straight for the tower which stood out in the waters of the lake, for it was the one place where they had seen Lawrie, and so, elated by the ease with which they had entered, they moved quietly forward across the stone floor. There were rooms on their right, but they did not trouble to examine them. All they required was some corridor which would lead them to the tower.

They stole down a passage which led out of the hall, Catherine with pistol in one hand and torch in the other. Actually the latter was not required, for at intervals more oil-lamps shed a weak yellow light. The passage led out into a second though smaller hall, on the opposite side of which a staircase led to the floor above. A corridor ran to left and right. Fenton would have recognized the spot, for many times he had ascended those stairs to Malakoff's room.

Stella and Catherine halted at the end of the passage and conferred in whispers before finally deciding to turn right-handed towards the tower. The silence of a tomb hung over Zec, and the flames in the lamps

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burned steadily. There seemed to be no one abroad except themselves, and it was something of a shock when a tall, robed figure appeared among the shadows on the staircase opposite. It was Malakoff, who had come to see if there was any sign of the returning Johannes.

Ever since the aeroplane had flown round Zec the Russian had been far more perturbed in his mind than he admitted to his companions. He knew how long Johannes would take to scull to the mainland and back, and he was anxious to hear that all had gone well with Konrad and Markevicius. In spite of the fact that Johannes was no more than a few minutes overdue, Malakoff had become uneasy, until at last he had determined to go down to the boathouse.

Stella and Catherine silently drew back against the sides of the passage as Malakoff came down the stairs. His tall figure was clothed in the long black monk's robe which he wore when living in the castle. His eyes were fixed on the floor, and his fingers caressed his grey moustache. He came slowly across the stone pavement towards the passage where Stella and Catherine were concealed.

Both women knew instinctively that discovery was imminent, yet they made no movement. There was still a chance that at the last moment Malakoff would turn aside. If he did not Catherine, with that inflexible determination peculiar to her, had already made up her mind what to do. Her dark eyes beneath straight, level brows were fixed steadily upon the Russian. Slowly she raised her pistol.

The noise of the shot sounded like the report of a small cannon. The echoes ricochetted from the stone walls for what seemed like several minutes to the two women waiting tensely in the shadows. Catherine had expected that shouting and commotion would follow

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her shot, and she was considerably perplexed when silence fell. Her eyes searched the shadows, returning every few seconds to the motionless figure in the monk's robe which lay upon the stone floor, a dark pool slowly gathering beneath its shoulders.

"Who is it?" whispered Stella, now standing tense

and alert beside Catherine.

"Malakoff, the leader of the Herons, and the most

dangerous of them."

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The silence was uncanny. Stella felt as if they were surrounded by hosts of invisible men lurking in the shadows, watching and waiting for them to make some movement.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by Malakoff. A throaty gurgle came from him. For a few seconds his arms and legs moved aimlessly and jerkily. The gurgling faded away into a horrible bubbling sound. A red stain appeared about his ragged grey moustache. Then he became motionless again.

CHAPTER XXI

For That You Must Die!

Frantisek Wilenski was sitting in an armchair in the room above the main entrance to Zec when Malakoff decided that he would go in search of Johannes. Wilenski grunted and did not look up from the papers he was studying, papers which were, in fact, the timetable and plans of the Herons' plot. He heard the Russian go out and close the door, and then, a few seconds later, the stillness of the castle was split by a

cracking report.

Wilenski leapt to his feet and listened. He could hear the faint echoes of the shot fading away. His first impulse was to dash out to the staircase. Indeed, with the papers clutched in his hand, he took one step towards the door. Then he halted. He did not know what had happened. Had Fenton made another attempt to escape? Had Malakoff accidentally dropped his pistol? Had Johannes suddenly become homicidal and shot the Russian? These thoughts flashed through Wilenski's brain as he stood listening and wondering. The last suggestion perturbed him more than the others. He had never trusted Johannes. He loathed that scowling, half-witted face, with its peering eyes. It roused all that was evil in him, and he had, he was well aware, bullied the unfortunate Prussian most unmercifully.

After a pause Wilenski locked the plans in the safe. Then he made for the door and stood for a time listening, but the Castle of Zec was more silent than any bat-haunted ruin. He slipped an automatic from his pocket and quietly opened the heavy door. The corridor, dimly lit by oil-lamps, was deserted. He crept on

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tiptoe towards the staircase. Through his large, round lenses he peered into the uncertain shadows, his pistol thrust forward, his forefinger quivering on the trigger.

It was impossible to see into the hall from the top of the staircase, so he descended a few steps with the utmost caution, but he was quite unprepared for the sight which met his gaze as he pushed his scrubby head carefully over the banisters. On the paved floor Malakoff lay upon his back, his wide eyes staring straight up at the huge beams which supported the ceiling. A pool of blood, looking black and ugly in the dim light, had welled from beneath his body, and a sinister stain had spread over his chest. But what amazed Wilenski even more than the inert form of his leader was the sight of the two figures which stooped over him. A man, dressed in dark jersey and trousers, and a woman with fair hair. Who were they, and how had they entered Zec?

Wilenski saw the man drag Malakoff's limp arm from the pocket of his cassock and detach an automatic from the clenched fingers. For an instant the man showed it to the girl with an expressive shrug of his shoulders before slipping it into his hip pocket. Then he straightened up, his own weapon in his hand, and gazed about him. Only then did Wilenski, frozen as still as any waxwork among the shadows, recognize him. As the rays from a distant lamp struck across the stranger's face Wilenski saw the familiar level brows and resolute features of Catherine Borodoshin.

At that moment the hand which held his pistol shook, and his stomach seemed to turn over inside him. Catherine Borodoshin, firm friend of Fenton, inside Zec, Malakoff probably dead, and the zero hour for the great plan less than forty-eight hours ahead! No wonder that Wilenski felt the strength ebb from him as he realized the meaning of Catherine's presence. If

Fenton was released there might still be time for him to prevent the attack on Lithuania taking place. With Konrad and Markevicius making their way to the rendezvous near Ezerenai, and Malakoff dead, only Wilenski himself remained. Johannes was quite likely as dead as Malakoff, for the sight of the bunch of keys gripped in Stella's hand was sufficient to tell Wilenski how the two women had made their entry.

There were two courses open to Wilenski. Either he could make sure that Fenton did not escape, in which case he would have to shoot down two women in cold blood, or he could slip out of Zec while Fenton was being released. Whichever course he took he would have not only to act swiftly, but also to decide immediately, for in the hall below the two women were moving

towards the passage which led to the tower.

Wilenski had almost decided to make certain of his own escape and let the Herons' plot take its course when two further contingencies occurred to him. Fenton was not the kind of man to rest until all the Herons were under lock and key. In particular he would doubtless pursue Wilenski throughout the length and breadth of Europe. There was only one country where the Pole could seek sanctuary, and what would the rulers there say to him when they realized that he had fled at the very time when he was most wanted? Malakoff had often told him unpleasant things about Russia, and the way in which those of her servants, ambassadors, generals, and farm-workers alike, were treated when it was considered that they had not carried out their duties to the State. The prospect of trying to explain his action was not attractive, nor would his reasons sound convincing. On the other hand, if the plan succeeded, and Wilenski could show that he had taken command when Malakoff had been killed-there was no doubt in Wilenski's mind now about the fate of the

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Russian—it was probable that he would reap a rich reward. And rewards were very acceptable to the Pole, for he had an avaricious nature. The thought of an increased reward, coupled with the probability of an unpleasant fate if he ran away, decided Wilenski that

he must prevent the rescue of Fenton.

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That he would have to shoot the two women and Fenton in order to make the plan safe did not disturb him one whit. In fact, he had aimed his pistol at Catherine's back and his finger was tightening on the trigger when he paused and then lowered the weapon. He was not a good pistol shot, aim in that uncertain light was not easy, and though he might hit Catherine, the second woman was certain to take cover in the passage which they were about to enter. Then he would have thrown away the strongest card in his hand—surprise—and the odds would still be at evens. No, there was a better and more silent way.

Wilenski watched the two women enter the dark passage. When they had vanished he lowered his pistol and, fumbling beneath his coat, drew a short, broadbladed knife from its sheath. Then he stole quietly down the stairs, a weapon in each hand, and made

swiftly across the hall.

Johannes recovered his senses slowly, and when at last he opened his eyes the cold light of dawn was coming through the windows of the boathouse. A terrible throbbing ache was coursing round his battered head, and he found it difficult to focus his gaze properly. But there was something else which puzzled him. Where was he? What was he doing in these surroundings? He looked down at his stained, rough clothes, his thick-soled, clumsy boots, regarded his dirty hands with disgust, and fingered his unshaven chin with something that almost amounted to horror. What was he, Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten, of the Prussian

Guard, doing in this filthy garb, he who had always been a martinet and prided himself upon the smartness of the uniforms of himself and his men? He plucked at his coarse trousers and frowned.

For Johannes was regaining his sanity. Taken from him by the shock of an exploding shell which had caused that terrible groove in his forehead, it had been restored to him by the blow from Catherine's pistolbutt. He remembered himself as an officer of the Prussian Guard, but he could not yet fathom how he came to be sitting in a boathouse, though the building seemed to be familiar. He rose to his feet rather shakily, for his head still hurt him, and made for the door.

The cool air of the early morning helped to clear his head. He recognized the solid stone walls of Zec and the lake, looking like grey steel in the pale dawn, but still he did not understand how he came to be there.

He walked slowly up to the main gates. He felt better now, though still acutely puzzled, and as he paused outside the iron-studded doors his hand automatically reached for something at his belt. He glanced down. His keys were missing. What keys, he thought. The keys of this castle, of course. Yes, the keys of Zec. Memory was returning now: the gear wheels of his mind had been jerked into motion by the discovery that his keys had vanished.

He leaned against the stonework and covered his face with his hands. Liebe Gott, how his head ached! He recollected how he had rowed Konrad and Markevicius ashore, recollected the amazing sight of a woman's ankles outside the boathouse on his return, before something had struck the back of his head. What was a woman doing on the island? There had never been a woman in Zec before.

His hand went out and tried the wicket-gate, which 280

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opened to his touch. There was something peculiar about that. Some one had got into Zec. Where was Malakoff? At the remembrance of that name his heavy brows drew down over his eyes, and his fists clenched. Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten was recollecting how vilely the Russian had treated him and the indignities he had suffered. He, an officer of the Prussian Guard, a servant to a pig of a Russian! And Wilenski. That was even worse. Assuredly a Pole was lower than a Russian, and in Von Rinten's scheme of things both were placed beneath the animals of a farmyard. Then suddenly he remembered Fenton, and the scowl faded from his face. Of all the inhabitants of Zec the Englishman, although his prisoner, had been the only one to treat him as if he was a human being.

Quickly, for his head was much clearer and he was beginning to think more easily, he put together the facts which had come into his mind. The woman's ankles, the stolen keys, the open door to Zec, could mean only one thing—an attempt was being made to rescue Fenton and Urquhart, the other prisoner. But Malakoff and Wilenski were in the castle. Again Johannes scowled. Wilenski had treated him abominably, taking advantage of Johannes' servility and fear of Malakoff to sneer at him, to reprimand him severely for the most trivial offences, and to order him about as if he were a dog. He, an Ober-Leutnant of the Prussian Guard!

But all that was ended. Johannes had found himself. He was a Prussian gentleman and an officer. He had been decorated personally with the Iron Cross by the Kaiser, his Emperor. No longer would he be at the beck and call of a Russian and a Pole. There was an account to settle, an account long overdue, and if at the same time he could help the Englishman, who doubtless recognized a gentleman no matter how shabby his clothes were, then he would be glad to assist. With a

pathetic attempt to draw himself up and square his bowed shoulders, a furious Ober-Leutnant pushed open

the gate and entered Zec.

Johannes hurried out of the entrance-hall and along the passage, following the route taken by Stella and Catherine. As he came within sight of the staircase, however, he halted and from the dark depths of the

corridor stared in surprise.

Upon the stone pavement lay the body of Malakoff, apparently lifeless, and cautiously descending the staircase, a knife in one hand and an automatic pistol in the other, was Wilenski. The Pole's eyes, Johannes observed, were fixed upon the entrance to the passage which led to Fenton's cell. With difficulty Johannes suppressed a desire to bellow with rage, rush at Wilenski, and get his great hands upon him. But the sight of the pistol restrained him. He was unarmed, and, besides, from the expression on the Pole's face and the direction of his gaze it seemed that there was some other matter afoot. So Johannes waited in the shadows while Wilenski crept towards the passage.

The passage was a dark and gloomy place, with a short flight of steps at the beginning and two sharp turns. Johannes descended the steps, keeping close into the wall among the shadows thrown by the roughly hewn stones, and saw Wilenski creeping towards the first bend. He waited until the Pole had rounded it, and then hurried after him. Hurried is rather a euphemistic term, since he dared not run because of the noise made on the stone floor by his heavy boots, but he crept along as fast as was consistent with silence. Beyond the turn Wilenski was peering round the second bend. Johannes knew that it was possible to see the door of Fenton's cell from that point.

He moved with increasing caution. Wilenski appeared to be greatly interested in something, and when

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Johannes had approached within a few yards he was able to look over the Pole's shoulder. Two figures stood beside the cell-door, a man and a woman—apparently the woman, thought Johannes, whose ankles he had seen at the boathouse. They were both bending over the bunch of keys which had been detached from his belt. So much Johannes had gathered when Wilenski began to creep slowly forward with bent knees, his eyes fixed on the two preoccupied figures. His intention was obvious, for he had raised the knife which he carried in his right hand.

Johannes hesitated no longer, and threw aside all pretence of caution. Indeed, this was his undoing. Had he approached carefully he would have surprised the Pole. As it was he could contain his fury and hatred no longer. With a bellow of rage he sprang

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Wilenski, startled almost out of his wits at the unexpected interruption, had a vision of a huge, frowning figure, with immense hands outstretched, bounding towards him. He scarcely recognized Johannes, and in any case his nerve broke, so that he pulled the trigger of his automatic in sheer fright. He was a poor shot, and the semi-darkness of the passage did not help him. The bullet passed through the fleshy part of Johannes' left upper arm, but failed to stop him. He bellowed again at the red-hot stab of pain, and as his fingers closed on Wilenski the Pole fired his second shot.

This time he knew he had hit the Prussian, for he felt Johannes' great weight sag against him. The next instant, however, his powerful hands gripped him. His wrist was caught in a grip of steel, the pistol twisted out of his grasp. But he retained his knife, which Johannes had ignored, and he stabbed frantically again and again as Johannes shook him till his teeth

rattled.

The blood spurted from the knife-wounds, but Johannes did not heed them. Wilenski felt the thick fingers fumbling at his throat, and he knew instinctively that unless he could prevent Johannes from obtaining a grip he was already as good as dead. "His heart," he thought. "I must reach his heart." But his head was swimming with the shaking he had received, and, having lost his glasses, which were now ground to splinters under Johannes' boots, he could not see. Johannes' fierce, panting breath was in his face; the strong fingers were about his throat. Desperately, frantically, he struck with all his remaining strength at where he thought his adversary's heart might be. He felt the blade of the knife sink through clothing and flesh and then grate upon bone.

Johannes snarled like an infuriated beast, from which at that moment he was not far removed. Past indignities and cruelties beyond description lent added strength to his hands, and his grip tightened inexorably

upon Wilenski's throat.

"Swine! Swine!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "You have insulted me, Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten, of the Prussian Guard, and for that you must die!"

The glare in his eyes showed that, though he had returned to sanity at that moment, he was berserk with

hatred and ragé.

Catherine and Stella were standing with their backs to the cell-door, their pistols ready. In the subdued light they could see two men struggling beyond the oillamp, but they were unable to distinguish who the contestants were. The smaller of the two gradually grew weaker, and finally ceased to struggle. The big man shook him venomously once or twice, and at length, satisfied that life was extinct, hurled his victim savagely against the stone wall. Wilenski, his face suf-

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fused, his eyes and tongue protruding, covered with Johannes' blood, slid to the floor and lay motionless.

Johannes shambled forward without so much as another look at the Pole. Catherine's finger tightened on the trigger, but before she could speak or act Johannes halted and put a hand to his body below the heart. When he drew it away it was covered with blood and a dark, ominous stain was spreading slowly through his clothing. Smaller stains appeared about his shoulders where Wilenski had stabbed frantically with his knife. Wounded in the body and losing blood from half a dozen minor gashes, the struggle with the Pole had left Johannes weak and giddy, despite his tremendous muscular strength. Now that the fight was over he felt suddenly very ill. He put out his right hand to the wall to steady himself, and peered at Catherine and Stella.

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"Please, please—" he began, wishing to reassure them. A spasm of pain crossed his face, and he gasped. Beneath his scrubby beard he had gone very white. With an effort he stood upright. "I am Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten, of the Prussian Guard. I must apologize for my appearance, but it is due to circumstances beyond my control. You need fear nothing from me. I believe you are here to rescue Herr Fenton, the Englishman. That behind you is not his cell. It is the third one there, on the right."

He groaned again, and took an uncertain step forward.

"The rat hurt me, I think," he said, trying to smile, but his features twisted in agony, and his voice was weak. He lurched towards the wall and leaned against it. The two women watched fascinated, still uncertain whether he was friend or enemy.

"Herr Fenton is a gentleman, and in me, despite my poor attire, I like to think he recognized a gentleman

also. He was kind to me, and bore me no ill-will, though—I—was—his—gaoler."

His words came slowly, and a curious, puzzled expression crossed his face, as if he could not understand

the change which was taking place within him.

"I see," he continued almost in a whisper, "you have my keys. The key to Herr Fenton's cell is the one with the red tape on it."

He paused again, breathing heavily.

"I beg you to excuse me. I must rest a moment.

The third cell on the right, remember."

He drew himself up, made an attempt to click his heels together, and bowed from the waist in the German manner. Then he returned to the wall, the strength left his knees, and he slid into a sitting position. By the time Stella had reached his side his head had sunk upon his chest. "I shall be all right presently," he muttered, with waxen face and closed eyes.

He spoke the truth, for two minutes later Ober-Leutnant Von Rinten had joined the majority of the

former Prussian Guard.

CHAPTER XXII

It Is Our Only Chance

When Stella turned round Catherine was almost in a state of collapse against the cell-door. Outwardly the stronger of the two, she had suddenly found the strain too great, and the death of Johannes, the third violent passing she had witnessed since she had entered Zec, had bereft her of her physical and mental reserves. She leaned against the door, arms and head hanging, with just sufficient strength in her legs to keep her off the floor, and it was the dainty Stella, with her blue eyes and fair hair, who at this critical moment took over the leadership from her more masculine companion.

"Pull yourself together," she whispered urgently. "We've only just begun our task. Quickly, Catherine,

for Martin's sake."

Catherine nodded dully, and with a shudder turned away from the two bodies in the passage. Stella was already fumbling at the lock of the cell indicated by

Johannes.

Fenton had been roused from an uneasy sleep by the sound of Wilenski's pistol-shot. Thereafter faint sounds of a struggle had come through the thick door. He had tried looking through the keyhole, but had been unable to see anything. Now he stood in the centre of his narrow prison, his eyes fixed on the door. Hope, almost dead within him, had risen again, for what more could those pistol-shots mean than an attempt at rescue? Yet even so he was unprepared for the sight that met his eyes when at length the cell-door swung back.

With an automatic in one hand, dishevelled, her soft hat pulled low over her face, Stella stepped into the cell.

There was a second's stupefied silence. Fenton's eyes nearly fell out of his head.

"Stella!" he gasped in bewilderment.

"Lawrie, darling!"

The next instant they were in each other's arms, Stella's pistol dangerously near the back of her husband's neck. Neither of them had ever experienced quite the same feeling of joy at their reunions. Fenton, still wondering why his wife, of all people, should appear, tightened his grip until Stella gasped. Her eyes filled with tears. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. It did not matter to her that Lawrie was dirty, unshaven and ill, that his cheeks were hollow, his eyes unnaturally large, his clothes filthy, that the cell was damp and horrible. Appreciation of that, coupled with acute pity and sympathy, would come later. All that she realized then was that she was in her husband's arms.

Fenton, looking over her shoulder, saw a jerseyed and trousered figure appear in the doorway and lean wearily against the wall.

"Catherine!"

The exclamation roused Stella to action. In a few brief sentences she explained what had happened. Fenton's brain had some difficulty in grasping the facts. He understood that Malakoff, Wilenski, and one other, whom he recognized from Stella's description as Johannes, were dead, but that there might be more men in the castle.

"I doubt it," he said, "unless it could be Konrad and Markevicius, and they would surely have appeared by now." Stella related how they had seen two men being rowed ashore in the dinghy. A sudden thought struck Fenton. "What is the date?" he cried.

Stella considered. "The 4th, I think."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it is the 4th," said Catherine from the doorway. A shaft of early-morning light coming through the

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narrow window accentuated the anxiety on Fenton's face. "Then we've no time to lose," he said. "The Herons' coup is to take place to-morrow. We must warn Kovel."

"Kovel is sitting by the lakeside admiring the scenery," said Stella contemptuously. "You'll have no difficulty

in finding him."

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"First let us release Urquhart, and then get out of here."

Catherine pulled herself together, and her eyes lit up as Fenton, one arm still round Stella's waist, moved towards the door. "You know where he is?"

Fenton grinned and nodded. "Unless they've moved him, which I doubt."

"Here," said Catherine, "you'd better take this." She

gave him the pistol she had taken from Malakoff.

They moved along the passage, stepping carefully past the bodies of Wilenski and Johannes. The strain was considerable, for they were none of them sure whether anyone remained in the castle. Catherine had difficulty in controlling herself. Acute trembling fits took possession of her. She bit her lip till the blood came in the effort to force her limbs to obey her will. Stella, following closely behind Fenton, seemed suddenly to have developed nerves of steel, and appeared to be quite unmoved. Fenton himself, now that he was in action once more, was feeling better every minute.

They passed the body of Malakoff, lying at the foot of the staircase, and plunged into the gloomy passage beyond. A turn to the right brought them to the winding stairs which led to the foundations of the castle. Daylight never penetrated to this part of the building, and they were glad of the torch which Stella had taken from Johannes. As they crept down the passage hewn out of the solid rock, so narrow that their arms brushed the sides, Fenton heard a stifled gasp from Catherine.

"I am afraid you must be prepared for a shock," he

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said over his shoulder. "When I last saw him Martin was rather queer in his head. He may behave strangely."

Stella put out a comforting hand to Catherine as Fenton unlocked the door of the cell with Johannes' keys. As the light of the torch swept over the straw-littered interior something rustled in a far corner, and there came the sound of a terrified whimper. The stench and filth of the place were appalling. Fenton stepped down on to the floor, greasy with dirt and decaying food, and pulled away the straw. Urquhart attempted to burrow deeper in a paroxysm of terror.

With soothing words Fenton tried to calm him. Presently he became reassured, and, lifting his head, peered uncertainly round in the light of the torch. A moan burst from Catherine's lips. She swayed, and for an instant Stella thought she would faint. Then she pulled herself together and, entering the cell, held out her arms.

"Martin!" she whispered. "Martin!"

The demented man blinked at her through his long fringe of red hair, but there was no recognition in his glance. Catherine stifled a sob.

"Leave him to me," whispered Fenton.

Urquhart seemed to realize that Fenton was a friend, and without much difficulty the latter persuaded him to leave the cell and follow him along the narrow passage. They had almost reached the top of the staircase when there came a terrific crash, which even the massive walls of Zec did little to deaden.

"What the deuce is that?" cried Fenton, and the words were hardly past his lips when a second and a third crash followed. He raced to the landing and out into the passage which led to the foot of the main staircase, dragging the stumbling Urquhart behind him.

The hall, illuminated now by the full light of day, was undisturbed. From a distant part of the castle came

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the rumble of falling masonry, and above it the roar of an aeroplane engine. Immediately a fourth detonation followed.

"My God! Bombs!" cried Fenton, recognizing the sound for the first time.

"That's Kovel's doing," said Stella.

Fenton ran to the foot of the main staircase. Here Urquhart saw the body of Malakoff and shied like a young colt. If Fenton had not retained a firm grip on his hand he would have fled.

"Do you think you can manage him?" Fenton asked Catherine. "For heaven's sake don't let him go! Take him into the entrance-hall and wait for me. I must go and see what is in the safe upstairs."

He turned to Urquhart, whose eyes were fixed immovably upon the man whose inhuman treatment had wrecked his mind. "Go with this kind lady. She will take care of you," he said gently. "I'll join you in a minute."

Urquhart allowed himself to be led away like an unwilling child, his head, with its tousled mop of red hair, straining back over his shoulder, his sunken eyes fixed upon Malakoff.

Fenton turned to the body, and in a pocket of the cassock found a bunch of keys. As he ran up the stairs, to the accompaniment of the roar of an aeroplane engine rapidly increasing in volume, he saw Stella behind him.

"Go back!" he cried. "Go with Catherine!"

Stella shook her head. "If we're going to be bombed we'll be bombed together."

"You darling!" cried Fenton, with a wealth of

meaning.

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His knowledge of locks and keys enabled him to open the safe quickly. Inside were the papers put there by Wilenski. Fenton gathered them up. There did not

seem to be anything else of importance, but he grabbed a pile of correspondence, leaving some bulky ledgers. As he shut the door another bomb fell. There came the head-splitting noise of an H.E. detonation. In spite of its solidity, the floor of the room shook.

"This is getting unhealthy," shouted Fenton, and,

taking Stella's hand, he ran for the door.

As they reached the foot of the stairs another bomb exploded. There was an appalling roar. They saw the body of Malakoff, arms and legs whirling fantastically as in some grim, macabre dance, lifted and hurled against the far wall. On the heels of the explosion came the thunderous rumble of collapsing masonry. Then the blast of air, forced through the narrow left-hand passage and spreading out fanwise, smote them. They were flung backward against the stone steps; the hall was filled with the acrid fumes of the explosion, clouds of dust, and pieces of flying timber. The stairs seemed to hit Fenton agonizingly in every part of his body at once, but he contrived to retain the bundle of papers and his grip on Stella's hand. He had a brief glimpse of Malakoff's head nodding drunkenly in the violence of the blast before a cloud of dust filled the hall.

"Are you all right?" he shouted to Stella as he scrambled to his feet, choking in the fumes and dust.

She nodded as she rose shakily. Hand in hand they ran across the hall and into the corridor which led to the entrance. Fenton had never been bombed before, and he did not like it. He had a horrible feeling that at any moment a bomb might explode behind him. The dust and fumes got into their lungs, and they coughed retchingly while they ran. As they reached the entrance another bomb fell, this time on the other side of the castle, and the undulating roar of the aeroplane engines seemed continuous.

They found a white-faced Catherine, tears running

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down her cheeks, struggling with Urquhart, who, when he saw Fenton, stumbled towards him.

"My mouse!" he screamed. "My mouse! I won't go

without my mouse!"

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Fenton remembered how the demented man's mouse had once before prevented them from reaching safety. If they remained in the castle for long a direct hit might end the argument. Then an idea occurred to him. Protestation was useless, but a little cunning might accomplish a good deal. He bent down and shouted in Urquhart's ear, "I've got it in my pocket. Just been to fetch it. If we don't get it some cheese soon it will starve. You don't want that to happen, do you? Come along, then. I know where there's some beautiful cheese."

Urquhart nodded, his shock of hair flopping up and down grotesquely, and quietly followed Fenton through

the wicket-gate.

Outside in the sunlight they took to their heels at Fenton's urgent command. The noise of the bombing 'planes increased, and as they reached the boathouse two

more detonations shook the ground.

"Confound Kovel and his aeroplanes!" said Fenton, untying the motor-boat's painter. "If the castle had not been solidly built we should have a different tale to tell—if we'd been able to tell any at all." As he pressed the self-starter he glanced quickly at Stella. "Did you know he was going to do this?"

"He hinted as much when I saw him in Wilno. That's

why we tried to reach you first."

"And he knew Urquhart and I were here?"

"He must have done."

Fenton made no comment. A second later the engine spluttered into life, and after a preliminary collision with the side of the boathouse the launch went astern out into the lake. For the first time since they had entered Zec Stella and Catherine felt moderately safe.

The lake was calm and the sun warm and comforting. Only the noise of the three aeroplanes circling above disturbed the peace of the morning. Two columns of black smoke rose from Zec into the still air. A huge crater had been made in the earth close to the wall at the back of the castle, and the stones were scorched and blackened. Two gaping holes showed in the roof, but it seemed as if even modern high explosive had done surprisingly little damage to the massive structure. High in the air above the centre of the lake a host of wild birds, disturbed by the explosions, wheeled and screamed in panic-stricken flight.

Fenton turned the launch and headed towards the hamlet indicated by Stella. There was a crowd of people, most of them in uniform, at the water's edge. In the stern of the boat Catherine sat with her arm protectively round Urquhart, who, after his long imprisonment in the dark cell, found that the bright sunlight hurt his

eyes. He sat hunched up, his face in his hands.

The journey to the hamlet was not entirely uneventful, for one of the pilots soon spotted the launch and came down in a long dive. It is never pleasant to have an aeroplane approaching from directly above, and it becomes still less pleasant when there is a possibility of being machine-gunned. Fenton held up his hands in token of surrender. As the machine, gleaming in the sunlight, roared past a few feet above the launch, he saw the goggled faces of the pilot and observer staring down at them. The aeroplane banked steeply and returned. Again Fenton raised his hands, and Stella held out a small white handkerchief. Satisfied, the pilot gained height and circled over them, while the other two machines continued to bomb Zec, apparently with the object of driving out any remaining occupants.

As the launch drew nearer the land they saw that the beach was crowded with troops. The villagers stood

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together some distance away, and on the fringe of the cottages were numerous motor-cars and lorries. Farther on were two cars equipped with wireless, the head-phoned operators industriously sending and receiving messages.

"They seem to be having quite a field-day," murmured Fenton. "Kovel's done himself proud. About half a dozen London policemen could have managed this show

quite as effectively."

Gustav Kovel was the only person not in uniform among the interested crowd which watched the motorboat approach, and it was he who welcomed Fenton as the craft drew into the tiny wooden jetty.

"Thank God you're safe!" he cried. "And Urquhart

too."

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Fenton adjusted his monocle, looked at him coolly, and then turned to help Stella ashore. "Yes, it's rather surprising, isn't it? Come along, Catherine."

Kovel bit his lip and flushed. "Of course, I knew you'd get clear," he muttered, as if trying to excuse

himself.

"Then you must be possessed of second sight," Fenton retorted. He looked round the assembled troops. "Have

you a doctor and an ambulance here?" he asked.

An officer with the insignia of the medical branch stepped forward. Quickly Fenton explained what was wrong with Urquhart, whose extraordinary appearance had roused considerable interest and speculation among the onlookers.

"Get the best advice you can," Fenton urged, "and

as soon as possible I'll get in touch with you."

These instructions were simple enough, but when the medical orderlies tried to lead Urquhart away he refused to go. Fenton had his mouse, and he would not leave the animal. So Fenton was forced to go through the pantomime of putting the wretched mouse into the pocket of one of the orderlies, after which Urquhart

transferred his attention thither. Catherine went with him in the ambulance.

Next Fenton inquired for the officer in command, and was confronted by a tall, broad-shouldered major with an iron-grey moustache and a keen eye. He knew part of Fenton's story, and rather liked the look of this grubby, fair-haired Englishman, admiring the way in which he had apparently taken command of the proceedings. Especially did he approve of the manner in which Fenton had snubbed Gustav Kovel. Major Zeper disliked Kovel, who had been riding the high horse and seemed to think that his special civilian activities entitled him to order about officers of the Polish Army.

The Major, Fenton, and Stella, with Kovel trailing disconsolately behind, went to one of the cottages. Food and drink were prepared for them, while Fenton explained what had happened at Zec. At once Major Zeper gave instructions for the bombing to cease, the wireless cars sent out their messages, and presently the aeroplanes were disappearing over the tree-clad hills. The launch, filled with soldiers, set out for the island.

Fenton then related what he knew of the Herons' plot, and how it was due to mature on the morrow, the 5th of the month, at the latest. A quick scrutiny of the papers which Fenton had brought from the safe confirmed the knowledge which he had already accumulated. In addition it seemed that the plot was to take effect in three phases. A party of men dressed in the uniform of the Polish Army was to assemble near the frontier, and at approximately the same time a number of Polish girls were to be abducted and taken into Lithuania. This was to be the signal for the Polish party to attack the Lithuanian frontier guards.

"We must stop these blackguards before the fighting begins," cried Major Zeper, "or else"—he shrugged his shoulders—"heaven knows where it will stop!"

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"I agree; but how?" asked Fenton.

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"Warn the frontier guards. Double them too."

"Yes, but it's a wide frontier, not easy to patrol, and two things we don't know—the place where this party of men is to rendezvous and the route along which the abducted girls are to be taken."

The Major fingered his moustache. "We could use aeroplanes, but much of the country is forest, which would make spotting difficult. And if these miscreants chose to move at night I can't see what we can do to stop them, beyond sending up as many troops as we can assemble at such short notice."

"Wait a moment," said Fenton slowly. "If, as my wife says, Konrad and Markevicius left Zec early this morning before it was light, and the latest time for the plot is to-morrow—at what hour we don't know—then the rendezvous must be on the frontier somewhere near here. Have you a map, Major? I've not the faintest idea in what part of Poland I am."

A map was produced, and Fenton discovered that Zec was a little more than sixty miles from the Lithuanian frontier, and that the nearest Lithuanian town was Ezerenai. Suddenly an inspiration burst upon him. He jabbed his finger on the map, and hurriedly explained how he had crossed the frontier by a secret route close to Ezerenai, and had arrived at a charcoal-burner's hut.

"I believe that will be the rendezvous," he cried, "and probably the girls will be taken into Lithuania by the same route as the one by which I came out. We must make for there."

Zeper studied the map for a moment. "It will take some time. The roads are few and bad. Yes, it will take us a long time. But it is our only chance, and we have no alternative. Come with me."

He led the way out of the cottage and gave a few rapid orders. A fast car with a soldier driving drew up, and

Major Zeper signalled Fenton to enter. He looked a trifle surprised when Stella followed, and Fenton thought it advisable to suggest that she accompany Catherine in the ambulance.

Stella shook her head firmly. "Oh, no! I'm not going to let you out of my sight. When I do you always get into trouble."

Zeper smiled, and under cover of a rug Fenton

squeezed her hand.

Gustav Kovel, who was realizing that the affair was not turning out so successfully for him as he had expected, was standing hesitatingly with one foot on the running-board. He had taken no part in the consultation in the cottage, and had followed the party out like a pet dog. An officer was already sitting beside the driver, and Major Zeper, pointedly ignoring Kovel, was preparing to share the back seat with Fenton and Stella.

"Is there nothing I can do?" Gustav asked humbly, acutely aware that he had made a blunder on his first

big job.

Major Zeper affected not to hear, but Fenton, whose active brain had been swiftly reviewing his adventures, said quickly, "Yes! Get in touch with the Lithuanian authorities and tell them to arrest all suspicious people at the Café of the Thin Heron, Ezerenai—in particular a girl named Marie, who sings there, and a man named Hardt."

The car moved off, leaving Kovel surrounded by a crowd of wide-eyed children. A woman with a baby in her arms stood next to him, staring in wonderment at the rear of the disappearing car. Outside the cottage which Kovel had just left an elderly, bearded Pole sucked contemplatively at an empty pipe. He did not understand all this bustle and military activity. Perhaps it was another war, but that did not worry him particularly. He was too old to be bothered by a mere war. He

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would remain where he was in the sunlight, sucking his

pipe.

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a pr inc Behind the car followed the wireless unit, and soldiers were hurriedly piling into lorries and other available vehicles. With a sudden roar two motor-cyclists shot ahead and stormed up the hill out of the village. Fenton released Stella's hand and began to study the papers he had brought from the safe.

"There's one thing which worries me," he said to Major Zeper. "Konrad and Markevicius have a long start. I know that the first aeroplane which came over perturbed them. They may strike immediately they reach the rendezvous, in which case we shall be too

late."

CHAPTER XXIII

You Would Like a Little Leave?

During the first part of the journey Fenton acquainted Major Zeper with that part of his story which was still unknown to the soldier. Two thoughts were uppermost in the minds of both men. Had Fenton guessed right with regard to the rendezvous and the route into Lithuania, and would Konrad and Markevicius strike before the troops could arrive? On these two conjectures depended whether or not they would be able to frustrate the dead Malakoff's plans.

Now and again Fenton felt Stella's hand steal into his beneath the rug, and he drew comfort from her touch. Even if he failed in his ultimate object he knew that he and Stella were once more upon their old footing, their temporary strangeness banished into the limbo of forgotten things. They were reunited lovers, and Major Zeper, observing them, smiled beneath his moustache.

The Major was right about the roads, or rather the lack of them. Several times the car, followed by the lorries, jolted down rough rides between the trees, and it was fortunate that the vehicles were strongly built. There were numerous halts to consult maps, and once, to Fenton's dismay, they were forced to return a matter of some miles and make a wide detour. Nothing more galling could be imagined when time was the supreme factor.

The day wore on, the tree-trunks swam past in endless procession, and dusk was falling before they got within reasonable distance of the frontier.

Major Zeper stretched out a brown hand. "That's the railway-line from Wilno to Daugavpils."

Fenton peered forward into the gathering shadows. There was a familiar look about the landscape, and after a moment or two of uncertainty he picked up two or three topographical features which showed him that he was not mistaken. At his request the car left the rough track it had been following and took to the countryside. Under cover of the railway embankment the convoy halted. Major Zeper gave an order, and, together with a dozen soldiers, accompanied Fenton and Stella across the embankment. A little farther ahead a pale yellow square of lamplight indicated the position of Old Karas's hut.

A quiet investigation proved that there was no one in the vicinity, whereupon the party approached the hut and without ceremony flung open the door. Old Karas was alone. With an oily rag he was industriously cleaning the action of an ancient gun which looked as if it would be far more dangerous to the marksman than the target. On the table by his side stood the inevitable half-empty mug and bottle of Schnapps.

The clatter of the opening door made Karas look up, and as he saw the uniformed figures he beamed with

delight.

"Ah, gentlemen, you are early! Eager to begin a

night's good work, I expect."

Then his rheumy eyes fell upon Fenton's dirty, creased civilian clothes, and in spite of the growth of fair beard he recognized the Englishman. The monocle, gleaming in the lamplight, was an unforgettable sight to the old Pole. His smile vanished, and his mouth fell open.

Major Zeper strode across the floor and abruptly wrenched the gun from his hands. "And what work is this in which you are going to take part?" he

demanded.

Old Karas glanced from one to another, and opened

and shut his mouth, so that his grey beard waggled foolishly.

"Speak!" ordered Major Zeper.

"There—is—some mistake," stammered Karas. "I thought-" He took refuge in a racking cough, and stretched out his hand for the mug containing the Schnapps, but the Major whipped it away, and the bottle as well.

"You're half drunk already. Come along, out with it! Whom were you expecting, and why were you

cleaning this gun?"

The charcoal-burner stared at the silent soldiers in the doorway, his muddled brain striving to think of an excuse. Something had gone wrong, and he was all at

"Only a friend," he stammered at last. "We were going to do a little shooting together."

"Bison, I suppose?" snapped Zeper sarcastically.
"Yes—er—no—I——"Karas stuttered.

Major Zeper thrust his face into the other's, and held him with his fierce gaze. "I will tell you what you were going to shoot-Lithuanian frontier guards."

Old Karas's mouth fell open, and remained open.

There was a tense silence.

"Is that true?"

"No!"

"You lie! Do you want to be shot as a traitor?"

Automatically the charcoal-burner's hand went out for the Schnapps and failed to find it. He shuffled his feet uncomfortably, and tried to avoid the steady gaze of the many eyes that were watching him.

"The truth, or-" threatened the Major, and made

a significant gesture.

Fenton strolled forward and perched himself on the edge of the table. He had an idea that the Major's military tactics were not likely to work on the obstinate

old fellow. They were likely to be here all night, and time was precious. He adjusted his monocle and grinned

cheerfully at Karas.

"Do you remember our conversation some time ago, when I stayed the night here? You remember saying, no doubt, that the Polish frontier guards took Lithuanian girls for their amusement, and I asked you how you would like Jadwiga, your granddaughter, treated the same way. You remember that? By the way, where is Jadwiga to-night?"

"She has gone out," Karas muttered.

"With Konrad and Markevicius, I suppose?" sug-

gested Fenton quietly.

The casual manner in which the names were uttered took Karas completely by surprise, and he started violently.

"What does his damned granddaughter matter?" growled Major Zeper, but Fenton motioned him to be

quiet.

"You see, Karas, we know everything. Your nice little plot will not take place to-night. We should like, however, to be able to put a stop to any shooting. Doubtless you and the others have been misled. We'd like to save you from further trouble. If you will tell us where you were meeting your comrades, so that we need not waste time searching for them, we will see afterwards if we can get your part in the plot dealt with very leniently. As I said, you were misled."

Karas, ever crafty and cunning, began to see a way of saving his own skin. He glanced at Fenton out of the corners of his red-rimmed eyes and fidgeted with his beard. Major Zeper smouldered in the background.

"Is that possible? I—I only acted for the best."

"I've no doubt of that," said Fenton, longing to add, "you stinking old hypocrite!" but aware that any such candid expression of opinion would certainly impair

their present amicable relations. "But I can promise you nothing, except a long term of imprisonment, if you fail

to accept my suggestion."

Karas saw the force of this argument. "I have been made a fool," he declared with a fine show of anger, acquiring a sudden histrionic ability from the Schnapps he had swallowed. "I have certainly been misled. I regret it profoundly." He cast a sidelong glance at Fenton, to see how his recantation was being taken. "I only wish I had realized it before. As it is, I must do my best to undo the wrong I have done. I and certain other men were due to meet in a wood two miles from here at ten o'clock to-night. We were to be under the leadership of Josef Markevicius."

"And where is Konrad?" Fenton asked.

Karas shrugged his broad shoulders. "I know not; nor do I know where he is going. He left with Jadwiga some time ago."

"You will show us the wood you mentioned?"

"Certainly."

Karas rose, staggered a little, and accompanied the others outside with as much dignity as he could muster. Two soldiers fell in on either side of him. Major Zeper held a brief consultation with his officers, and it was arranged that half the troops who were waiting by the railway embankment should go to the wood and arrest Karas's fellow-conspirators. One of the wireless cars would remain at the embankment to act as a link between the two parties, and a small guard would also be left at the charcoal-burner's hut to receive any unexpected callers.

"If what that drunken old fool has said is true," remarked Major Zeper, "we should be able to collect that lot nicely. You were too lenient with him, Herr Fenton. We should have threatened to hang him on the

nearest tree."

"In that case you would have got nothing but his corpse. You forget I've met him before and know the sort of fellow he is. All the same, I wish he could have told us what Konrad was going to do."

The Major tugged at his moustache. "We can only do as you originally suggested. Try to catch them as

they cross the frontier."

By this time it was quite dark. The remainder of Major Zeper's party, which consisted of the second wireless car, two lorries full of soldiers, with a couple of machine-guns, and the car which had carried Zeper, Stella, and Fenton, moved off in the direction of the frontier. Fenton sat next to the driver of the car and acted as guide. It was not an easy task, for Fenton had done the journey only once before, and then in the reverse direction under the instructions of Marie. But he had been driving, and therefore had noticed the characteristics of the route better than if he had been merely a passenger. After he had picked up the first few landmarks he found that the succeeding ones were easier to discover.

The leading car had its lights dipped, the remainder drove without lights, but as it was only possible to use second gear the combined noise of the high-revving engines was considerable. Fenton remembered how his own solitary progress had made sufficient row to wake the dead. Surely, he thought, this pandemonium would warn the whole frontier that something unusual was happening? He was glad when at length he was able to give the order to halt.

He had come as close to the frontier as was consistent with finding cover for the troops and vehicles. The cars and lorries were driven into a small wood, and pickets with hand-signalling lamps were posted on rising ground at some distance on either side of the route. The

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remainder of the men fell out to rest.

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Fenton retired to the back of the car with Stella and wrapped a rug comfortably round them both. He had done everything he could; the rest depended on luck and Major Zeper, who was at that moment pacing restlessly up and down with a junior subaltern. Rather too much depended on luck, Fenton considered, and began to be haunted by doubts as to whether he had guessed correctly or not. Had he made some mistake, which, when dawn came and found them still waiting and emptyhanded, would then be hideously obvious? Had Old Karas tricked him? Worst of all, had Konrad already crossed the frontier ahead of them?

He knew such thoughts were futile, yet so great was his anxiety that he could not suppress them. He glanced down at Stella, who lay in the crook of his arm, and saw that she had fallen asleep. In the dim light her pale face looked strangely ethereal and childlike. It seemed hardly possible that she was the mother of Peter, for she appeared so young.

"Poor kid," he thought, "she's been awake now for nearly twenty-four hours, a whole day of hideous strain and anxiety! And if it hadn't been for her love and

courage I shouldn't be here."

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of a member of the crew of the wireless car, who presented a message to Major Zeper. It was from the wireless car which had remained at the railway embankment. The rendezvous in the wood had been surrounded, and thirty men, some in peasant clothes, others in the uniform of the Polish Army, had been captured. No fighting had taken place, as the surprise had been complete. Josef Markevicius was among those taken prisoner.

This news did something to cheer Fenton. Karas had not lied after all, cunning old hypocrite though he was. Fenton settled down to wait again, and Stella, who had only awakened sufficiently to murmur his

name, snuggled closer against him. The hours dragged wearily past, and with midnight came a thin drizzle of rain out of the south-west.

"Lucky for us it didn't come on earlier," murmured Major Zeper, "for then anyone following us would have been certain to notice our tracks. As it is, the ground was hard."

Fenton grunted. He was desperately tired, and envied Stella, who was sleeping so peacefully. His restless mental anxiety was quite sufficient to keep him awake. By one o'clock he decided that Konrad must have already slipped across the frontier. It was a pity. He would have liked to make a clean sweep.

And then, on the rising ground in the far distance, a signal-lamp began to twinkle. Presently an orderly arrived.

"The lights of three vehicles have been observed coming in this direction," announced Major Zeper in tones of intense satisfaction.

Fenton felt a thrill steal over him. They waited expectantly until it was seen whether the approaching vehicles would pass close to the wood in which the lorries and soldiers were concealed.

After a while the signal-lamp winked out another message. The route was being adhered to, and provided there was no deviation it would be unnecessary for the waiting men to leave the wood. A lorry was quickly manhandled into position on the fringe of the trees, and a small searchlight mounted in readiness. A feeling of acute tension hung over the copse. Stella, woken by the stealthy movement of men about her, edged closer to her husband. Presently the signal-lamp flashed a warning, and a few minutes afterwards the dipped headlights of a motor-car came into view, to be followed after an interval by the sound of its engine. Behind the leading cars were two others.

Not a sound was to be heard in the wood, and every eye was fixed on the approaching lights. Steadily they drew closer, until, when they were half a mile away and it was obvious that they would pass along the edge of the wood, Major Zeper gave a whispered order. There was a faint metallic click as a machine-gun was swung into position. The cars came slowly on, bumping over the uneven ground, their engines in second gear. Fenton, leaning forward eagerly, felt Stella move by his side, and he put a protective arm about her. Major Zeper raised a hand to his lips.

Three seconds later a piercing whistle split the silence of the night. A lorry engine started up, there was a spluttering and a fizzing sound, and the white glare from the searchlight lit up three motor-cars a bare fifty yards away. At the same instant there came a hoarse

command to halt.

The leading car swerved almost as if the beam from the searchlight had struck it a blow. Then the whine of its engine rose sharply as the driver trod hard on the accelerator. The effort to escape was futile, for the menacing stutter of a machine-gun sounded above the roar of the engines, and the front wheel of the car melted away as the stream of bullets shattered the spokes. The bonnet plunged downward like the bows of a sinking ship, and the vehicle came to an abrupt stop, so that those following almost collided with it. There was a chorus of shrill feminine screams.

The staccato rattle of the machine-gun ceased, and a voice called upon the drivers of the cars to get out. They obeyed, standing in the glare of the searchlight with their hands above their heads. The passengers, all girls, ceased their frightened outcry and sat in silent amazement. The coup had been completely successful.

After having made the necessary arrangements for the guarding and transport of the prisoners Major

Zeper returned to his car. "Your friend Konrad is there," he said to Fenton.

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"Well, I won't bother to see him," chuckled the Englishman. "The sight of me on top of this little episode might be too great a shock for his nervous system. Besides, I'm very warm and comfortable here." He yawned. Now that the strain was over he felt very tired. Two minutes later, when the Major brought him the news, received from the Lithuanian authorities via Gustav Kovel and the wireless cars, that the Café of the Thin Heron at Ezerenai had been successfully raided and Marie and Hardt arrested, both he and Stella were fast asleep.

Three days later Fenton, shaved and decently clothed, but looking pale and fine-drawn, was facing Lord Braxted over the broad desk in the British Ambassador's room in Warsaw. His Excellency's aquiline features wore an anxious look, and he tapped the papers in front of him absently.

"Of course," he said, "this material which you obtained from Malakoff's safe shows clearly enough that the plot was of Russian—or, since the U.S.S.R. does not take responsibility for the activities of the Third International, shall we say, of Communist—origin. But that cannot be made public. The Russians would deny everything, and swear not only that they had no hand in it, but that it was the work of Fascists or Nazis, and designed solely to bring the great Soviet Republic into disrepute. All we can do is to consider it extremely fortunate that the plot was frustrated, thanks to you."

Fenton, smoking an excellent cigar, made a gesture of dissent. "Thanks to my wife. I got myself into a jam, and she pulled me out of it."

"Of course, of course," agreed Lord Braxted, not

quite sure what a 'jam' was. "However, it ended satisfactorily, and the Polish authorities have apprehended most of the participants. I fancy that Konrad, Markevicius, Konin, and one or two others will get lengthy terms of imprisonment. Some of the fools who thought they were doing their country a good turn will get off with a warning—those, for instance, who were captured in the wood, and other deluded patriots." He coughed nervously. "And you, I take it, would like a little leave?"

"I should; in England for preference."

"Then go as soon as you like. Carson will remain at Wilno." Lord Braxted gave a faint smile. "I fancy that the Polish authorities will be rather pleased. Not that they aren't grateful for what you've done, but they might think that as an—er—investigator you may learn more than they would like you to know."

"In other words, I am an embarrassment to them, and they will be glad to show me the door?" grinned

Fenton.

"Exactly," agreed Lord Braxted.

That evening there was a small private dinner-party at the Hôtel Europe, and since Alphonse, the manager, was one of the guests it was only natural that the best room should be reserved and the choicest food and wines selected. Fenton and Stella were the host and hostess, and they talked with him of old times until Catherine Borodoshin arrived.

They greeted her warmly and a trifle anxiously, for that afternoon a famous alienist had been to see Martin Urquhart, and they had yet to hear his opinion. Catherine, her eyes shining, put out both her hands. "He was very encouraging," she cried. "He said there is no doubt that in a few months Martin will make a complete recovery. Isn't it splendid? I feel as if I had been reprieved from a death sentence."

"And I too have news for you," said Fenton. "I put our people on to make inquiries about your husband, Carl Kropf, and I heard to-day that he died in Switzerland two years ago."

"So I am free to marry Martin," she whispered, as tears gathered in her eyes. She grasped Fenton's hand

in mute gratitude.

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An embarrassing moment was ended by the arrival of Ninon. Stella had prepared her husband to meet some one very different from the Ninon of the Blue Toad, but she was anxious to see how Ninon would face the one man she had really loved. But as Ninon, beautifully gowned in shining silver, hair exquisitely waved, held out a manicured hand there was nothing to show that her feelings had ever been more than friendly towards Fenton. The latter expressed his grateful thanks for the assistance she had rendered Stella.

Ninon smiled. "I could hardly refuse, could I, after your good turn to me some years ago?"

Fenton looked puzzled. "I don't understand." He

saw Stella smiling.

"I'm not very well versed in the Bible," said Ninon, but isn't there something about casting your bread upon the waters and it shall return after many days? Somebody sent me two hundred pounds, and I've a very good idea who it was."

Fenton blushed to the roots of his fair hair, and, adjusting his monocle, surveyed Ninon and said, "My dear Ninon, do you accuse me of keeping two women

at once?"

"No, Lawrie, only of keeping one and saving another," Ninon retorted, and kissed him before them all.

There was, in fact, a good deal of kissing that evening. Stella kissed Ninon; Catherine kissed them both;

Alphonse kissed everybody except Fenton, who threatened him with a champagne bottle, and so escaped.

Both Fenton and Stella had been anxious about Ninon's future, because they knew that Paul Konin was the owner of the establishment which Ninon managed, and that he would inevitably receive a long term of imprisonment. Ninon laughed gaily when they mentioned the matter.

"You needn't worry about me. Paul was so anxious not to be connected with such a place that he put everything in my name."

"So you will continue as before?" Fenton suggested.

Ninon shook her head. "I think not. I'll turn it into a respectable hotel. Then it will probably fail, I shall lose my money, and that will be the reward of virtue!"

Towards the end of the dinner Fenton was called away to the telephone. When he returned Stella lifted a

questioning eyebrow.

"Sir George," explained Fenton, "sending me his congratulations. Also the news that Master Peter is thriving, but that Odette has announced her intention of going away and breeding silkworms. She seems to think that would be a quiet and soothing occupation after a period of Peter."

Stella chuckled.

"Further," continued Fenton, "Sir George announced that the sum of five thousand pounds is awaiting me in London."

"Five thousand! What on earth for?"

"The reward offered by a benevolent Government for finding Urquhart. It will do very nicely for Peter's education."

Stella squeezed his hand under the table. "I don't care where he's educated, so long as he is half as good a man as his father! They can keep their five thousand."

Fenton regarded her seriously. "My dear, are you sure the champagne hasn't gone to your head?"

Stella smiled roguishly, and her husband gave an

exaggerated sigh.

"How like a woman! I struggle to earn a vast sum of money at her expressed wish, and now she doesn't want it. Well—I—am—damned!"

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